



Demon Daddy's Twin Daughters

Author: *Celeste King*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: They said I needed to breed.

No one warned me I'd become obsessed.

Trinity was supposed to be a vessel—just a human with sharp eyes and a body built for obedience. She offered me an heir in exchange for freedom. Simple. Cold. Forgettable.

But then I tasted her.

Felt her break open around me.

Heard her whimper my name like a prayer.

Now she's not just carrying my heir — she's carrying two.

Twin daughters marked by my blood and her defiance.

And if anyone threatens them?

Threatens her?

I'll show them what kind of monster they made.

They'll call them miracles.

I'll call them mine.

Because she doesn't just belong to the contract anymore.

She belongs to me.

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VAEL

The spires of Ti'lith cast long shadows over the alleyway as I stalk my mark through the winding corridors of Galmoleth's sole city. The scent of fear clings to the air—sharp, tangy, and as recognizable to me as my own reflection. The demon I'm pursuing isn't particularly clever, leaving a trail so obvious even a human could follow it.

Pausing at the corner of a twisted black structure, I catch sight of him—Nev'rozik, a minor thief who thought stealing from the royal treasury in Ikoth would somehow work out in his favor. His pathetic, hunched form scuttles between shadows like a rat sensing a predator. Which, I suppose, isn't far from the truth.

I roll my shoulders, feeling the comfortable weight of my weapons against my back. This job is almost insultingly easy. My mother would say it's beneath me.

"You should be focusing on more important matters," her voice rings in my head, unbidden and unwelcome. I can picture her perfectly—standing in her stark chambers, horn jewelry glinting in the red light of Ikoth, lips curled in disapproval. "The Vaelrix bloodline cannot continue itself."

I scoff, the sound echoing slightly in the empty alley. Nev'rozik freezes, his small horns quivering. Sloppy of me, but it hardly matters. There's nowhere for him to go that I can't follow.

"You're thirty-seven already, Vaelrix," I mimic her haughty tone under my breath as I slip from shadow to shadow. "Every respected demon has produced at least two heirs by your age. Your cousins have already established bloodlines."

My prey darts around another corner. I don't bother to rush—he's heading toward a dead end. I know this city better than the back of my hand.

"The business will die with you," I continue my mother's imagined lecture, drawing one of my smaller blades. The weight feels perfect in my palm, an extension of my arm. "Our reputation, our standing?—"

"Please! I didn't mean to!" Nev'rozik's voice interrupts my thoughts as I round the corner, finding him pressed against the wall, trembling.

I advance slowly, savoring the moment. His tiny horns—barely worth mentioning—mark him as low-born, insignificant. Nothing like the proud curl of my own that have earned respect in every corner of Aerasak.

"Didn't mean to steal from King Vag'thimon's personal vault?" I raise an eyebrow, twirling my blade between my fingers. "What, did you trip and accidentally pocket seven hundred nodals?"

"I was desperate!" His eyes dart around, seeking an escape route that doesn't exist.

"Aren't we all," I mutter, thinking again of my mother's endless pressure.

Find a suitable mate. Produce strong offspring. Continue the family legacy. As if I'm nothing more than a breeding stud with convenient assassination skills.

"You don't understand!" Nev'rozik drops to his knees, palms out. "I have children! Three sons!"

I falter for just a second, the blade stilling in my hand.

"How fortunate for you," I say, voice carefully neutral. "Your matron must be very pleased."

"She is," he snivels, misreading my pause as mercy. "They're everything to her!"

And there it is again—expectations, legacy, bloodlines. Even this pathetic excuse for a demon has managed to fulfill the one task I continuously avoid.

"Stand up," I snap, irritation flooding through me. "You're embarrassing yourself."

My mother's voice intrudes again. "The females I've selected for your consideration are all from excellent bloodlines. Strong, ruthless. Perfect for producing heirs worthy of the Vaelrix name."

Nev'rozik scrambles to his feet, hope flickering across his features.

"You're letting me go?"

I snort, refocusing on the present. "No. But you can die with some dignity."

His face crumples. "Please, my children?—"

"Should have been motivation to avoid crime," I finish, moving with practiced precision. "Or at least not get caught."

The blade slides between his ribs with surgical accuracy, finding his heart. I don't enjoy killing—it's simply what I do. What I'm good at. What generations of Vaelrix demons have excelled at.

His body slumps against me, and I ease it to the ground, avoiding the blood that would stain my clothes and make my journey back more conspicuous.

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"At least you leave something behind," I murmur to the corpse, popping out one eye as proof of completion. "Something besides a reputation and disappointed expectations."

I pocket the trophy and straighten, sighing. Another job done, another journey back to Ikoth where my mother will no doubt have arranged yet another "coincidental" meeting with some high-ranking demon female, expecting me to fall into line.

As I navigate back through Ti'lith's winding streets, I wonder what it would be like to have something—someone—to return to that was chosen by me, not dictated by bloodlines and expectations.

The towering black spires of Ti'lith's royal district loom ahead as I navigate through progressively wealthier neighborhoods. The palace itself—a monstrous construction of obsidian towers and jagged archways—looks like it grew rather than was built, reflecting the strange, organic architecture of Galmoleth.

My footsteps echo against the glassy stone path. Guards at the outer gates straighten when they see me approach, recognition dawning in their eyes. My reputation precedes me, as it does everywhere. The Vaelrix name carries weight, but my own accomplishments have eclipsed even my family's notorious bloodline.

"Here to see the Hooded King," I announce, not bothering with formalities.

The guards exchange glances but don't challenge me. One nods and gestures for me to follow. Smart move.

"His Majesty is expecting you," the guard mutters, leading me through a series of vaulted corridors.

Of course he is. Asmodeus might be new to ruling Galmoleth, but he's no fool. He knows when a bounty hunter of my caliber enters his territory and when one is preparing to leave.

The throne room doors—massive panels carved with scenes of demon conquest—swing open soundlessly. Inside, the cavernous space gleams with polished black stone and strategically placed braziers that cast dancing shadows across the walls.

And there sits Asmodeus, the Hooded King, lounging on his throne with the casual authority of someone born to rule. Even though many don't believe him to be a real King, I respected his rule here when I came and met with him before hunting on his lands. His features are partially obscured by the hood he rarely removes, but I can see enough to note his thoughtful expression.

"Vaelrix," he greets, voice carrying easily across the chamber. "Welcome back. Successful hunt, I presume?"

I approach and incline my head—not a bow, but acknowledgment. My mother would have a conniption fit if she saw such casual disrespect to royalty, but Asmodeus and I have an understanding.

"Always," I reply, patting my pouch. "Nev'rozik won't be stealing from anyone again."

Asmodeus leans forward, his eyes—the only part of his face fully visible beneath his hood—gleaming with interest. "I heard it was quite the sum he took."

"Seven hundred nodals from Vag'thimon's personal vault. Amateur move."

"Indeed." He drums his fingers against the arm of his throne. "I take it you're here to inform me you're leaving Galmoleth?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Your intelligence network is efficient."

"I make it my business to know the movements of certain individuals." A slight smile. "Especially those who could either be valuable allies or formidable enemies."

"And which am I?"

"That remains to be seen." He stands, descending the dais with fluid grace. "Before you go, I'm hosting a gathering tonight. You should attend."

I bite back a groan. A social event. Like I don't get enough of those with my mother trying to orchestrate some "chance" meeting with a potential breeding partner.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I have preparations to make?—"

"It wasn't an invitation." Asmodeus's tone remains pleasant, but there's steel beneath it. "Consider it a request from your king."

My jaw tightens. "You're not my king. I'm Ikothan."

"But currently on my territory." He moves closer, and I catch a glimpse of his mate lingering in a doorway behind the throne, watching our interaction with curious eyes. "Besides, you might find it... enlightening. My mate has invited several interesting humans."

"I have no interest in humans."

Asmodeus laughs—a rich, genuine sound. "Neither did I, once. Yet here we are." He gestures to his mate, who gives a small wave. "One evening, Vaelrix. Surely the great bounty hunter can survive a few hours of conversation and Amerinth."

I weigh my options. Refusing Asmodeus outright would be unwise, especially when I'll need to return to Galmoleth for future jobs. And the mention of Amerinth—that potent, sweet liquor that burns like fire—does make the prospect marginally more tolerable.

"Fine," I concede, the word tasting bitter. "One appearance. Brief."

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"Excellent." He claps me on the shoulder, an unusual familiarity that I barely resist flinching from. "Who knows? You might actually enjoy yourself."

"Doubtful," I mutter, already planning my strategic entrance and exit to minimize interaction.

"The celebration begins at dusk," he continues, ignoring my obvious reluctance. "Wear something that doesn't have blood on it."

I glance down at my immaculate black leather outfit. "I never get blood on my clothes."

"A true professional." His eyes crinkle with amusement. "Until tonight, then."

As I turn to leave, I can't help wondering what my mother would think of this development. She'd be thrilled at the networking opportunity, no doubt already calculating which high-ranking demonesses might be in attendance. She's not here, but that doesn't mean I won't have to field some prospects.

Gods, I need a drink.

2

VAEL

The palatial guest chamber assigned to me outshines most royal quarters back on Ikoth—all gleaming obsidian surfaces and plush crimson furnishings. Typical of

Asmodeus to showcase his wealth through such ostentatious display. I toss my weapons bag onto the oversized bed, the mattress barely yielding under its weight.

"Ridiculous," I mutter, running a hand over the silken coverlet. "Who needs this many pillows?"

A copper bathing pool, steaming and fragrant with oils I don't recognize, dominates the far corner of the room. After a moment's hesitation, I strip and sink into the hot water, letting it ease the tension from muscles always primed for combat. The warmth penetrates deep, reminding me how long it's been since I've allowed myself simple comforts.

My fingers trace the prominent scars decorating my ash-gray skin—each one a lesson, a memory, a job completed. The largest, a jagged line running from my collarbone to my sternum, throbs slightly at the touch. A gift from an Unseelie fae who nearly ended my career before it properly began.

"That one taught you to watch your blind spots," I remind myself, the words echoing in the cavernous bathroom.

After scrubbing away the grime of Ti'lith's streets, I examine the clothing options laid out for me. Someone—presumably on Asmodeus's orders—has provided formal attire: midnight-black pants tailored to accommodate a demon's powerful build, a deep crimson tunic embroidered with subtle gold thread, and a fitted black jacket with sharp shoulders that emphasize my height and build.

I dress methodically, movements economical. The outfit fits perfectly, which means Asmodeus has been planning this longer than he let on. Typical royal manipulation.

As I secure my smallest blade in a concealed sheath at my lower back, I catch my reflection in the polished wall. Without the usual leather and visible weaponry, I look

almost... respectable. My horns curl upward from my temples in elegant arcs—a sign of good breeding that my mother never tires of pointing out. My red-gold eyes appear more gold than red in this light, their vertical slits narrowing as I scrutinize myself.

"Remember," I tell my reflection, "observe, endure, exit. No entanglements."

The grand ballroom pulses with energy when I arrive. Demons of various ranks mingle beneath floating orbs of crimson light, creating an atmosphere both elegant and sinister. Music flows from an unseen source, a hypnotic blend of strings and percussion that sets my teeth on edge.

I skirt the perimeter, avoiding eye contact with several demons I recognize from previous jobs. A server passes with a tray of drinks, and I snag a goblet of Amerinth—its purple depths promising sweet oblivion if consumed in sufficient quantity. The first sip burns deliciously down my throat, releasing its characteristic fire in my chest.

"Vaelrix! I didn't expect to see you here."

I suppress a groan as Thaxilius approaches, a minor noble whose cousin I once tracked across three continents for skimming funds from King Vag'thimon's treasury.

"Thax," I acknowledge with a nod, taking another deliberate sip of my drink.

"Still the life of the party, I see." He chuckles, unfazed by my coldness. "Heard you bagged Nev'rozik. Clean job?"

"Always is."

"That's why you're the best." He raises his own goblet in salute. "My cousin still walks with a limp, by the way. Says the weather in his left knee predicts storms now."

I shrug, unapologetic. "He's lucky to have knees at all."

Thaxilius laughs too loudly, drawing attention I don't want. I use the moment to scan the room more thoroughly, noting the presence of humans among the demon guests. Unlike on Aerasak, where humans at least maintain some semblance of freedom, these women are clearly possessions—adorned with jeweled collars and chains that connect to the wrists of their demon masters. Their eyes remain downcast, movements restricted to serving or entertaining.

"Not your style?" Thaxilius follows my gaze to a particularly young human being paraded past us.

"I have no interest in creatures that can't defend themselves," I reply, draining my goblet and immediately replacing it with another from a passing tray.

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"That's the point, though, isn't it?" He leers. "Complete control. They're so... pliable."

My lip curls involuntarily. "Sounds boring."

A commotion near the main entrance draws our attention. Asmodeus and his mate make their grand entrance, his arm protectively—possessively—around her waist. For all his power and intimidating presence, the Hooded King looks at his human mate like she holds the secrets of the universe.

"Never understood that match," Thaxilius mutters. "Sure, humans are fine for entertainment, but to elevate one to queen?"

I remain silent, watching as the royal couple moves through the crowd. There's something in their interaction—a genuine connection—that makes my chest tighten uncomfortably. Not envy, surely. Just... recognition of something I've never experienced.

Suddenly, a ripple disrupts the practiced elegance of the gathering. My attention shifts instinctively toward the source—a human woman I hadn't noticed before, entering the ballroom on the arm of Captain Drez'kor.

She stands out among the other humans like a flame in darkness. While the rest shrink into themselves, she holds her head high, her long brown waves cascading down her back, catching the crimson light in auburn highlights. Unlike the others in their deliberately revealing attire, she wears a simple emerald dress that conceals more than it shows, yet somehow accentuates every curve.

"Who is that?" I ask, the question slipping out before I can stop it.

Thaxilius follows my gaze and his mouth curls into a knowing smirk. "Ah, the infamous Trinity."

"Trinity," I repeat. The name feels strangely significant on my tongue.

"One of the Protheka girls. Plucked from some forgettable human village about a year or so ago." He takes a long sip of his Amerinth. "She's been climbing her way through the ranks quite efficiently."

I watch as she navigates the room, her movements fluid and deliberate. "Meaning?"

"Meaning she started in the dungeons with the rest of the breeding stock, but hasn't spent a night there in months." He leans in conspiratorially. "She's slept her way into better accommodations, better treatment. Started with the guards, moved up to lieutenants, now she's with Drez'kor. Next stop, probably someone in the royal court."

I bristle at his tone. "You sound impressed."

"Not judging. She's survived. And I hear she's very good at what she does." He winks crudely. "Very attentive to a demon's... specific needs."

I want to look away from her but find it impossible. There's something calculating in how she scans the room, something strategic in her movements. When Drez'kor pulls her to the dance floor, she transforms—body languid, smile bright, every inch the captivating companion. But when his attention drifts to speak with another demon, I catch a flash of something else—a hardness, a wariness.

Our eyes lock across the room.

She falters mid-step, her carefully constructed expression slipping for just a moment. I feel a strange pull, like gravity shifting toward her. She looks away quickly, laughing at something Drez'kor says, but her gaze finds its way back to me moments later.

This happens several times—our eyes meeting, hers darting away, only to return. Each time, the connection feels more electric than before. I realize I've been staring without pretense, my goblet halfway to my lips for what must be minutes.

"She's noticed you," Thaxilius chuckles. "Better be careful. You might be her next target."

I ignore him, watching as Trinity whispers something in Drez'kor's ear. He nods, releasing her waist, and she glides across the floor with purpose—directly toward me.

Her approach is like watching a storm gather. The closer she gets, the more I notice—the controlled rise and fall of her chest, the slight tension in her jaw, the way her soft green eyes have hardened to emeralds.

And I find myself getting excited, ready to face her. I've never cared about anyone before but with her...

There is something different about her.

3

TRINITY

I've learned to move through these demon gatherings like I belong. Head high, shoulders back, small smile playing on my lips—just enough to suggest I'm pleased to be here without inviting unwanted attention. It's all part of the performance.

But that demon has been distracting me all night.

I accept drinks from the captain, the purple liquid burning pleasantly down my throat as I survey the room. Every event like this is an opportunity—to gather information, to make connections, to secure a better position. For myself and the other women.

My gaze drifts across the ballroom, mentally cataloging the demons present. The usual court parasites, several military officers, a few I don't recognize?—

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And my eyes snag on him again.

Tall, even for a demon. Ash-gray skin that somehow looks smoother than the others', less like stone and more like polished metal. His midnight-black hair is pulled back, emphasizing the elegant sweep of horns that curl upward from his temples. But it's his eyes that catch me—red-gold, intense, and fixed directly on me.

We've danced, we've drank, and no matter what, his eyes follow me. It's started to grate under my skin.

"Excuse me for just one moment, captain. It seems there's something I need to take care of," I say apologetically with a curtsy. The captain nods, disappointment flashing across his features, but thankfully he lets me go.

Without a backward glance, I stride toward the table the male has been sitting at, that flare of frustration beginning to burn hotter and brighter behind my ribs. Just who does this male think he is, to ogle me in such a public setting?

The demon watches my approach, the corners of his lips quirking up slightly. The sight only makes me angrier, and I ache to wipe that smug expression off of his face.

"Well? Is this what you wanted?" I demand as I come to a stop in front of him, placing my hands on my hips. The male says nothing, though I could've sworn the smirk on his face grew just a touch.

"You've been staring at me all night," I snap. "What is it that you want? Did you just want my attention?"

The slight smirk on the demon's face turns into a fully-fledged grin at my question, but he still doesn't respond. His eyes sweep down me slowly, assessing me in a way that makes liquid heat pool in my belly, before his eyes return to mine.

I stare at him expectantly, waiting for his response, but the damned male doesn't say a thing. Instead, he stands, drawing himself up to his full height, and it's only then that I realize just how truly massive he is compared to me.

The demon glares down at me, an infuriating smirk still twisting his full lips, before he turns on his heel and begins to walk away.

A sudden burst of rage fills me as he turns his back on me. How dare he? I deserve to at least receive a reason for why he's gone out of his way to ruin a perfectly good night!

"Hey!" I shout. Before I realize what I'm doing, I've grabbed the demon's admittedly muscled arm, stopping him where he stands. The demon turns his head dangerously slowly, giving me a glimpse of his strong profile.

"I'm talking to you! What in the world is your problem?"

His eyes flicker to where my fingers curl around his bicep, then back to my face. The muscle beneath my hand tenses, but he makes no move to break my grip.

"My problem?" His voice is deep, richer than I expected, with a rough edge that feels like velvet over gravel. "You're the one who stormed across the room to confront a stranger."

I release his arm like it's burned me. "After you spent half the night staring holes through me."

"Maybe I like what I see." His gaze doesn't waver, and neither does that infuriating half-smile.

"I'm not available for acquisition." I cross my arms over my chest. "So you can find someone else to mentally undress."

He laughs then—a genuine sound that transforms his face from merely handsome to breathtaking. "Is that what you think I was doing?"

"Isn't it what all of you do?"

"All of us?" Something dangerous flashes in his eyes. "You've met every demon in existence, have you?"

I lift my chin. "I've met enough."

"Clearly not the right ones." He takes a step closer, invading my space without touching me. "I wasn't mentally undressing you, Trinity."

The sound of my name on his lips sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. "How do you know my name?"

"It's my job to know things." His eyes lock with mine. "Just like it's your job to charm demons into giving you what you want."

The words sting more than they should. "You don't know the first thing about me."

"I know you're scared." He leans in slightly, his voice dropping lower. "I know you're smart enough to be scared. I know you're playing a dangerous game with dangerous people, and I know you're better at it than you should be."

My heart hammers against my ribs. There's no threat in his tone, just a certainty that unnerves me. "Is that supposed to impress me? Your mysterious insight?"

"Nothing about me is designed to impress you." He says the words like a promise.

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"Then why keep staring?"

"Isn't that what you want? You are putting on a performance, after all." His answer catches me off guard, and I search his face for the angle, for whatever game he's playing.

Something in my chest constricts painfully. "Don't pretend you care about that."

"I don't." He shrugs, broad shoulders rising and falling. "But I respect it."

We stand in charged silence for a moment, the sounds of the party swirling around us. I should walk away. Return to Drez'kor before he notices my absence. Play it safe.

Instead, I hear myself ask, "What's your name?"

"You want to know my name?"

I roll my eyes. "Is everything so difficult with you?"

His lips twist. "Vael."

"Vael," I repeat, testing the name. It feels dangerous in my mouth.

"You should go back to your captain now, Trinity." His eyes scan the room behind me. "He's looking for you, and I'm not in the mood to kill anyone tonight."

"Careful," I say, unable to stop myself. "I might think you're actually concerned about

me."

"Don't mistake self-preservation for concern." Vael's eyes narrow slightly. "I came here for business, not to spill blood over a human woman—even one as..." His gaze travels over me again, slower this time. "Intriguing as you."

Heat rises to my cheeks. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Just an observation." He shrugs again, the movement rippling across his broad shoulders. "You're different from the others."

"Different how?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

"You don't flinch." His voice drops lower. "Most humans can't even look us in the eye. But you—you walked right up to me, grabbed my arm, and demanded answers." A dangerous smile plays at his lips. "Either very brave or very foolish."

"Maybe I'm just tired of being afraid."

"Fear keeps you alive."

I tilt my head. "Is that what keeps you alive, Vael? Fear?"

Something flashes in his eyes—surprise, perhaps, that I've turned the question back on him. "No. I stay alive because I'm very good at ending threats before they become problems."

"That sounds exhausting."

A bark of laughter escapes him. "Says the woman performing for a room full of predators."

"At least I admit I'm performing." The words come out sharper than intended, revealing more than I meant to.

Vael steps closer, so close I can feel the heat radiating from his body. "And what would Trinity look like, I wonder, if she wasn't performing?"

The question lands like a physical blow. No one asks what I want. No one sees past the mask. I've spent so long crafting this persona that sometimes I forget there was ever anything else.

"You'll never know," I manage to say, proud that my voice doesn't waver.

"Probably for the best." His eyes hold mine, searching. "I suspect the real Trinity would be far more dangerous than this carefully crafted illusion."

"You think you have me figured out, don't you?" I cross my arms.

"Not even close." He smirks. "But I'd like to."

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"Too bad that's not on offer."

"What is on offer then?" His voice carries a challenge.

I raise my eyebrows. "For you? A goodbye and a pleasant evening."

Instead of being offended, he laughs again—a genuine sound that draws glances from nearby demons. "You really aren't like the others."

"You keep saying that like it's meaningful." I try to sound dismissive, but curiosity creeps into my tone.

"It is to me." The simple statement hangs between us, weighted with something I can't quite name.

Before I can respond, his eyes flick over my shoulder. "Your captain's patience is wearing thin. You should go."

"Are you dismissing me?" I feel oddly indignant.

Vael's lips curve into that infuriating half-smile. "Consider it a strategic retreat. For both our sakes."

"I don't need you to manage my interactions."

"No," he agrees easily. "You seem perfectly capable of managing them yourself." Something changes in his expression then, a seriousness replacing the amusement.

"Be careful with that one. He has a reputation."

The warning catches me off guard. "And you don't?"

"Oh, mine is much worse." He steps back, creating distance between us. "But at least I'm honest about what I am."

With that, he melts into the crowd, leaving me standing alone with my heart hammering in my chest. I blink, disoriented by his sudden departure and the strange encounter.

I force myself to turn and make my way back to Drez'kor, arranging my features into the pleasant mask he expects. But my thoughts remain with the strange demon and our bizarre conversation.

"There you are," the captain says, his eyes narrow with suspicion. "I was beginning to think you'd abandoned me."

"Never," I lie smoothly, accepting the fresh glass of Amerinth he offers. "Just needed a moment of fresh air."

As I sip my drink and laugh at his jokes, my eyes scan the crowd for that tall figure, those red-gold eyes. But Vael is nowhere to be seen.

What did he mean about the captain's reputation? And why warn me at all? Demons aren't known for their concern for humans, particularly ones they've just met.

I've spent years learning to read demons, to anticipate their moods and desires. But Vael... Vael is a puzzle I can't solve. He'd challenged me, seen through me in ways that both terrify and exhilarate. For once, I'd responded with my true thoughts instead of calculated placation.

It was reckless. Dangerous.

And I can't stop wondering when I might see him again.

4

TRINITY

I wake to the scent of fear and unwashed bodies. The familiar cloying smell I'll never get used to, no matter how many times I return to these cells.

"Trin! You're back!" A too-thin girl with matted blonde hair rushes toward me, relief flooding her face.

I force a smile as I shift on the hard stone floor, wincing slightly. The soreness between my thighs a stark reminder of last night's activities with the captain. He was a tad more possessive and I wonder if my conversation with Vael has unleashed some side of him I thought I had avoided. "Just for a little while, Mara."

My gaze sweeps across the dungeon. About twenty human women crammed into a space meant for half that number. They've all been here as long as I have, their eyes hollow with resignation.

"Did you get anything?" This from Elise, the oldest among us at maybe thirty-five. Her practical voice cuts through the murmurs of greeting.

I nod, reaching into the thin fabric of my dress where I've hidden my spoils. "Some dried meat. It's not much, but?—"

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"It's more than we had yesterday," Elise finishes, taking the smuggled food with gentle hands. Her eyes meet mine, understanding passing between us. She knows what it costs me to bring these small mercies.

I slide a small vial from my bodice. "And this. For infections."

A younger girl—couldn't be more than sixteen—presses against the wall, watching me with suspicious eyes. "What did you have to do for it?"

"Jessie," Elise warns.

"No, it's alright." I meet the girl's gaze. "Whatever it takes."

The stark truth hangs between us. In this place, my body is currency—a resource to be spent carefully for maximum return.

"The captain says he'll have proper blankets brought down," I add, loudly enough for all to hear. "And he's agreed to more regular meals."

Hope flickers across tired faces. Small victories, but they matter here where expectations are measured in crumbs.

I spend the day helping where I can—washing faces with our meager water ration, braiding tangled hair, listening to fears I cannot ease. Despite my better accommodations, I try to help here. But when the guards come to fetch me that evening, I'm almost relieved. I feel disgusted with myself.

"Captain wants you prettied up," the demon guard grunts, tossing a bundle of fabric at my feet.

I unfold it to find a dress of emerald silk. Expensive. Sheer in places meant to reveal rather than conceal.

"How thoughtful," I murmur, the words bitter on my tongue.

The women help me dress, their fingers deft despite their malnourishment. They know the drill. My success is their survival.

"You shouldn't have to do this," whispers Mara as she helps arrange my hair.

I squeeze her hand. "None of us should be here at all."

When I step into Drez'kor's private chambers an hour later, I'm Trinity the Desirable again. My smile is bright, my posture inviting, my eyes promising pleasures I have no desire to deliver but will.

"There's my pretty human." The captain's eyes rake over me, lingering on where the silk clings to my curves. "I've been thinking about you all day."

"I hope they were pleasant thoughts," I purr, sauntering toward him despite the screaming in my mind to run.

He reaches for me, thick fingers encircling my waist. "I've arranged something special tonight."

My stomach tightens with dread, but my smile never falters. "Oh? You spoil me, Captain."

"A private dinner in my quarters." His hand slides lower, cupping my ass possessively through the thin fabric. "Just the two of us."

I force a delighted laugh as his fingers dig into my flesh. "How intimate."

"And after..." His breath is hot against my ear, his grip tightening painfully. "After, I want to try something new."

I swallow my revulsion and trail my fingers along his chest. "Anything you desire."

His eyes darken with lust as he pulls me against him, hand now moving to my breast. The touch is rough, proprietary. "You feel that?" He presses his hardness against me. "That's what you do to me. Just looking at you."

I arch into his touch, playing the role to perfection. "I'm flattered."

"You should be." His mouth crashes down on mine, demanding and harsh. He's never been so rough with me, but I knew that his act had to be only a matter of time. I part my lips obediently, letting him explore while I try to dissociate from the moment.

When he finally breaks the kiss, he looks pleased. "The other demons are jealous, you know. They all want what I have."

"And what's that?" I ask, stroking his ego while his hands continue their possessive exploration.

"The most fuckable human on this rock." He pinches my nipple through the dress hard enough to make me gasp. He mistakes pain for pleasure and smirks. "And I've been thinking... maybe it's time we made things more permanent."

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My blood freezes, though my expression remains coyly interested. "Permanent?"

"You're wasted in those dungeons." His hand slides up to grip my throat lightly. Not choking, just... controlling. "I could keep you here. In my chambers."

Hope and horror war within me. Private quarters would mean regular meals, a real bed, maybe even a bath. But it would also mean being at his constant disposal, with no respite.

Still, I think of the girls in the dungeon. Of Mara's thinning frame and Jessie's distrustful eyes.

"That's... quite an offer," I manage, leaning into him as if overcome. "What about the other girls?"

His grip on my throat tightens fractionally. "What about them?"

I trail my fingers up his arm, making my touch light, enticing. "I worry for them when I'm not there. They look to me for... guidance."

"Not your concern anymore." His voice hardens.

I press gently against his chest, just enough to look up at him through my lashes. "But it would ease my mind to know they're cared for. When I'm... focusing all my attention on you."

His eyes narrow, but I can see him considering the implications. A happy, willing

bedmate versus one distracted by concerns.

"Fine." He slides his hand down to grope my breast again. "I'll see about getting their rations increased. But you'll be mine exclusively. No more being passed around."

The relief is genuine, though I mask it as gratitude. "You're so generous, Captain."

"Remember that when you're on your knees later." He presses his mouth to my neck, teeth grazing my skin. "Now pour the Amerinth. I'm hungry—and not just for food."

I detach from his grip with practiced grace, moving to the decanter while his eyes track my every movement. The emerald silk whispers against my skin, a constant reminder of how exposed I am.

As I pour the purple liquid, I catch my reflection in the polished metal of a wall scone. I barely recognize myself in this perfect mask of desire and compliance.

But behind my eyes, where he can't see, there's steel. I'll endure. I'll manipulate. I'll do whatever's necessary.

For now, the girls will eat better. They'll have blankets. Small victories in a war I'm fighting one degrading night at a time.

The morning after becoming the captain's exclusive plaything is a blur of servitude. I'm shuffled between his quarters and the communal baths, where demon attendants scrub me raw under his orders. My skin stings from their harsh ministrations, but I endure it with a practiced smile.

"The captain likes his possessions spotless," a horned attendant remarks, her nails digging into my scalp as she washes my hair.

I meet her gaze in the mirror. "Then I shall be immaculate."

By evening, I'm dressed in another revealing creation—midnight blue that drapes like water over my curves, strategic cutouts exposing the sides of my breasts and the curve of my hip. The captain had it sent to his chambers specifically for tonight's occasion.

"A garden stroll," he'd announced over breakfast, his hand possessively resting on my thigh under the table. "I want everyone to see what's mine."

Now, as we walk the winding paths of the palace gardens, I understand the true purpose of this outing. This isn't about romance. It's about ownership—a demon parading his prized pet.

The gardens of Galmoleth are nothing like the practical herb plots of my human village. Twisted trees with blood-red leaves tower overhead, their branches forming archways across the path. Flowers that would never grow on Protheke bloom in riotous colors—some glowing faintly in the gathering dusk, others closing their petals as if shy of our presence.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Drez'kor's palm slides down my bare back, lingering at the base of my spine. "Almost as beautiful as what I have right here."

I lean into his touch, a calculated move that makes him growl with approval. "The gardens are magnificent. I've never seen aracin blossoms growing away from the beaches before."

"Our mages adapted them." His hand dips lower, cupping my ass through the thin fabric. "I can have some sent to our chambers if you'd like to see them up close."

"That's very thoughtful." I force warmth into my voice even as his fingers dig into my

flesh.

We round a corner, coming upon a secluded alcove surrounded by luminous blue flora. The captain pulls me roughly against him, his mouth finding my neck.

"I've been thinking about this all day." His breath is hot against my skin, one hand already bunching up my skirt while the other grips my breast hard enough to bruise. "About bending you over right here where anyone might see."

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I arch into him, playing my part even as my stomach churns. "What if someone comes?" I ask breathlessly, making it sound like excitement rather than dread.

"Let them watch." His tongue traces my collarbone as his hands grow more insistent. "Let them see that you're mine."

His fingers find bare skin where my dress parts at my thigh, sliding upward with clear intent. I press my palms against his chest, not pushing him away—never that—but guiding him to a stone bench mostly hidden by towering plants with purple fronds.

"Why not here?" I suggest, my voice a practiced purr. "So you can watch my face while I pleasure you."

His eyes darken with lust. "Always so eager to please."

"Only for you, Captain." The lie tastes bitter, but I coat it in honey and let it fall from my lips.

He sits heavily on the bench, pulling me onto his lap so I straddle him. His hands immediately push my dress higher, exposing me to the cool night air. I suppress a shiver that has nothing to do with the temperature.

"I should fuck you right here," he growls, gripping my hips so tightly I know there will be bruises tomorrow. "Make you scream loud enough for the whole palace to hear."

I roll my hips against him, feeling his arousal. "I wouldn't be able to stay quiet

anyway."

His laugh is dark as one hand tangles in my hair, yanking my head back to expose my throat. "That's what I like about you, human. Always so?—"

"Captain Drez'kor." A sharp voice cuts through our moment.

I feel his body tense beneath me, his grip tightening painfully in my hair before he releases me. Relief floods through me so intensely I nearly sag against him.

"What?" he snaps, not bothering to adjust my clothing or his own posture.

A demon guard stands at attention a respectful distance away, his eyes carefully averted from my exposed state. I casually tug my dress down, grateful for the interruption even as I maintain my mask of disappointment.

"Urgent message, sir. Commander Vex'thal requests your immediate presence."

The captain curses, shoving me off his lap with enough force that I stumble. I catch myself against the bench, quickly straightening my dress with fingers that tremble slightly with relief.

"This better be important," Drez'kor snarls, adjusting his clothing. He turns to me, grabbing my chin roughly. "Wait in my chambers. Be ready when I return."

"Of course." I lower my eyes submissively. "I'll make sure everything is to your liking."

He grunts, releasing me with a little push before stalking after the messenger. I watch him go, maintaining my posture of eager anticipation until he disappears around the curve of the path.

Only then do I allow myself a single, shuddering breath, my shoulders sagging as the tension drains from my body. The reprieve is temporary—he'll return eventually, probably angrier and more demanding for having been interrupted—but for now, I'm alone.

5

TRINITY

I wait until Drez'kor's footsteps fade completely before allowing my false smile to crumble. My fingers trace the tender spots on my hips where his grip will leave marks by morning. The garden's beauty feels tainted now, every glowing flower and twisted branch a witness to my degradation.

"Bastard," I whisper to the empty air, wrapping my arms around myself despite the mild evening. The midnight blue fabric feels like a costume now, another prop in this ongoing performance.

A twig snaps.

I whirl around, mask instantly back in place, lips automatically curving into the inviting smile the captain expects.

But it's not Drez'kor.

A tall figure emerges from the shadows between two luminous trees. Gray skin catching the soft glow of the flora around us, those unmistakable red-gold eyes with their vertical slits fixed on me with unsettling intensity.

My breath catches. Vael. The demon from Asmodeus's gathering days ago.

"Interesting performance," he says, his deep voice rumbling through the quiet garden.
"Though the finale was interrupted."

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I straighten my spine, tugging at my dress where it reveals too much thigh. "You shouldn't be lurking in shadows. The captain doesn't appreciate others eyeing his possessions."

Vael steps fully into the light. He's even more imposing than I remember—towering height, muscular frame moving with predatory grace, those thick horns curling up from his head. Unlike the captain's gaudy attire, he wears simple black, the fabric doing nothing to disguise his power.

"How long have you been watching?" I demand, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Long enough." His gaze travels slowly down my body, but unlike the captain's leering appraisal, his assessment feels clinical, like he's cataloging injuries. "Long enough to know the captain isn't what you want."

A bitter laugh escapes me before I can stop it. "And you would know what I want?"

"I know what you don't want." He gestures to where Drez'kor disappeared. "That. Him. His hands on you."

Heat flushes my cheeks—embarrassment or anger, I'm not sure which. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know you're smart enough to play a dangerous game." He takes another step closer. Unlike the captain, he maintains a respectful distance. "I watched you manipulate him into promising better conditions for the other humans."

My mask slips for a fraction of a second. "You heard that?"

"Enhanced hearing." One corner of his mouth quirks up, not quite a smile. "Demon, remember?"

"Hard to forget." I look pointedly at his horns, then away.

A heavy silence falls between us. In the distance, I hear voices—other demons enjoying the evening gardens. Vael cocks his head slightly, listening, then relaxes.

"We're alone," he assures me. "For now."

"Lucky me. Another demon who wants a private audience." I make my voice cutting, defensive. "What is it you want, Vael? To take the captain's leftovers?"

His expression darkens, jaw tightening. "I'm not here for that."

"Then why are you here?"

He studies me for a long moment, those strange eyes searching mine. Then he cocks his head to one side, the gesture oddly animal-like. "Tell me, Trinity. Don't you want freedom?"

The question hits me like a physical blow. Freedom. Such a simple word for something so impossibly distant.

"Freedom?" I repeat, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. "What would a demon know about that? You're not the ones locked in dungeons, passed around like party favors."

"No," he agrees, surprising me. "But I know a cage when I see one. Even one gilded

with silk dresses and private chambers."

I laugh, the sound hollow even to my own ears. "And I suppose you're offering to spring me from this cage? Out of the goodness of your demonic heart?"

His expression doesn't change, but something shifts in those predator eyes. "Maybe I have my reasons."

"Everyone has reasons," I counter. "Usually selfish ones."

"You don't trust easily." It's not a question.

"I wonder why." I gesture at my revealing dress, at the gardens, at the whole situation.

Vael's gaze softens fractionally. "Smart. Trust is dangerous."

"So is hope," I whisper before I can stop myself.

He's still watching me, those otherworldly eyes taking in every detail. Something about his gaze feels different—like he's looking at me, not through me or at parts of me.

"You never answered my question," Vael says, his voice oddly gentle for such an imposing figure.

"Which one? You demons ask so many." I attempt a casual shrug, but my shoulders are too tense to pull it off convincingly.

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A hint of amusement flashes across his face. "Freedom. Don't you want it?"

I turn away from him to trace my finger along the glowing petal of a nearby flower. Its light pulses in response to my touch, as if alive. "Freedom is a fairy tale they tell children," I say, keeping my voice light. "Like true love or happy endings."

"Cynical for someone so young."

"Experience, not age, breeds cynicism." I glance back at him. "And I've had plenty of experience with your kind."

He doesn't flinch at the accusation in my tone. Instead, he steps closer, not invading my space but close enough that I can catch his scent—something unexpectedly clean, like mountain air after a storm.

"Yet you've never tried your tricks on me," he observes, tilting his head. "Why is that?"

The question catches me off guard. He's right. With every other demon—the captain, Asmodeus, the guards—I play my part: the seductive human, the charming pet, whatever mask will get me what I need. But with Vael, I've never even attempted it.

"Maybe you're not worth the effort," I lie, refusing to examine the real reason.

His laugh is unexpected—a deep, rumbling sound that seems to vibrate through the garden. "You're a terrible liar, Trinity."

"And you're unusually interested in a human's motivations." I cross my arms, studying him with genuine curiosity. "Most demons don't bother trying to understand us beyond our... utility."

"I'm not most demons."

"So I've noticed." The words slip out before I can stop them, honest in a way I rarely allow myself to be.

Something shifts in his expression—a softening around those predatory eyes. It triggers a flutter in my stomach that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with something far more dangerous: attraction.

I shouldn't feel this pull toward him. He's a demon—a member of the race that enslaved me, that keeps my people in dungeons. But there's something about the way he looks at me, like he's trying to solve a puzzle rather than assess a possession, that makes my pulse quicken.

"What would you do with it?" he asks quietly.

"With what?"

"Freedom. If you had it."

I laugh bitterly. "What a question. I'd..." The words die on my lips. What would I do? I've spent so long just trying to survive that I've never dared to imagine a life beyond these walls. "I don't know," I admit finally. "Isn't that pathetic? I can't even dream properly anymore."

Vael takes another step closer. "Dreams can be rebuilt."

I look up at him, suddenly aware of how close he is, how his towering frame blocks out the garden around us. But instead of feeling trapped, I feel... sheltered. It's a dangerous thought.

"Why are you really here, Vael?" My voice emerges softer than intended.

"I've been watching you," he admits. "Not just tonight. You're... different from what I expected."

"Different how?"

"You care about the others. The human women. You put yourself at risk for them." His gaze is penetrating, seeing past my carefully constructed defenses. "It's not a survival instinct. It's something else."

I swallow hard. "Maybe I'm just cultivating allies."

"No," he says with certainty. "It's compassion. Something rare in this place. Rarer still in someone fighting so hard to survive."

The understanding in his voice threatens to crack something inside me, something I've kept frozen just to endure. I reach for my usual tools—a flirtatious smile, a coy look—but they feel wrong with him. False. For the first time in years, I want someone to see the real me, not the mask.

"I don't know how to be any other way," I whisper, the most honest thing I've said in years.

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"I don't know how to be any other way," she whispers, and something in my chest tightens at the raw honesty in her voice.

Her mask has fallen completely now, and without the practiced seduction, the calculated smiles, she's even more beautiful. Fierce. Real. I find myself wanting to see more of this Trinity—the one who isn't performing for her own survival.

The memory of finding her with Drez'kor earlier burns through me again. His hands on her waist, her body pressed against his. The practiced smile on her face that didn't reach her eyes.

I hadn't planned to return to the gardens tonight. After our brief encounter at Asmodeus's gathering, I told myself I'd satisfied my curiosity about the human woman who'd caught my attention. But three days later, here I am, stalking through shadows, drawn back to her like a predator to prey.

Except she isn't prey. Not to me.

When I spotted Drez'kor pawing at her, something primal and possessive roared to life inside me. Before I could think it through, I'd paid a messenger an exorbitant sum to deliver an "urgent" message to the captain. Watching the fool scramble away, promising to return and finish what he'd started with Trinity, had taken every ounce of my self-control not to rip his head from his shoulders.

"You still haven't told me why you're here." Trinity's voice pulls me from the violent fantasy. She's watching me with those guarded green eyes, her arms still wrapped protectively around herself.

"I find myself... interested in you." The admission costs me something, though I'm not sure what.

A humorless smile curves her lips. "I've noticed demons tend to be 'interested' in me. Usually in very specific ways."

"Not like that." The denial comes quick—too quick. Because it's not entirely true, is it? I do want her. The physical pull between us is undeniable. But it's not just lust that's drawn me back to her side.

"No?" She raises an eyebrow, disbelieving. "Then how, exactly, are you 'interested' in me?"

I study her face—the wariness, the exhaustion behind her eyes, the stubborn set of her jaw. She's survived pure torment, this human. Survived and protected others while doing it.

"I have a proposition for you." The words come out before I've fully formed the thought, but as soon as I speak them, I know this is why I returned tonight.

She laughs bitterly. "Of course you do."

"Not what you're thinking." I take a step closer, close enough to catch her scent—something clean beneath the cloying perfume Drez'kor obviously prefers. "I'm offering you freedom. I can get you off this rock before the captain even comes back." Otherwise I might have to kill him, too. There's no way he's touching her again.

Her body tenses, hope and suspicion warring in her expression. "What's the catch?"

I admire her instincts. No demon offers something for nothing.

"I need an heir."

Her face shutters instantly, walls slamming back into place. "So you are just like the others. You want a broodmare."

"No." I growl the word, offended despite myself. "If I wanted that, I'd have taken one of my mother's arranged matches with a demon noblewoman. I'm offering you a contract. A transaction that benefits us both."

I don't add that I've never taken her deals because I can't stomach the idea of letting any of those women around me long enough to wait for a child. Fucking them? Sure. But letting them attach themselves to me for the pregnancy—or longer—has always sent disgust roiling through me.

With Trinity though...

She crosses her arms, skepticism radiating from every line of her body. "I'm listening."

"Bear me an heir, and in exchange, I'll set you up with a new life on Aerasak. Permanently." I hold her gaze, letting her see the truth in my eyes. "You'll have my protection. No one—not Drez'kor, not any demon—will touch you again without facing my blade. You'll want for nothing."

Trinity goes perfectly still, her expression unreadable. "Why me?"

It's a good question. One I've been avoiding asking myself. The obvious answer is physical attraction—she's beautiful, with a strength that calls to something in me. But there are beautiful women everywhere. Why am I standing here, offering this specific human a way out?

"You're resilient. Intelligent." I find myself gesturing to the space around us. "You've survived in a place designed to break humans. You've protected others at cost to yourself. Those are traits worth passing on."

Her eyes narrow. "And what happens after I give you this heir? You throw me back to the dungeons?"

"No." The very thought makes my blood boil. "The contract would be permanent. You remain under my protection for life."

"As what? Your slave? Concubine?"

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"As the mother of my heir. With all the respect and privileges that position entails." I step closer, needing her to understand. "My home is on Aerasak, not here. You'd never have to set foot on Galmoleth again. You'd have your own quarters, freedom to move about my properties."

Hope flickers in her eyes before she ruthlessly suppresses it. "And the other women? The ones in the dungeons?"

Of course she'd ask about them. Her first thought isn't for herself, but for those she's been protecting.

"I can't take them all," I admit. "But I could speak with the King. I'm sure with his mate, he is inclined to help release them all."

She's quiet for a long moment, weighing my words, searching for deception. I let her look her fill. I have nothing to hide from this woman who might become the mother of my child.

"Why should I trust you?" she finally asks. "How do I know this isn't just another kind of cage?"

"You don't have to trust me," I say, watching the emotions flicker across Trinity's face. "Not yet. But I'm offering you something real—a contract between us. Demons honor our agreements."

"How noble." Trinity's lips quirk up at the corner. "Especially when those agreements benefit you."

I can't help the low chuckle that escapes me. Most humans would be cowering, desperate to please. But this one meets my gaze with unflinching challenge.

"Benefits go both ways, Trinity. You get freedom, security. I'll get you out of here and set up with a new life. I get an heir."

She circles me slowly, assessing. The moonlight catches in her wavy brown hair, casting auburn highlights through the strands. Her wariness doesn't feel calculated now—just the natural caution of a survivor.

"And this heir—what happens to the child? Would they be... what? Half-demon?"

"Yes. And they would be raised as my heir, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails."

She stops directly in front of me, close enough that I can see the slight tremor in her hands—the only visible sign of her nervousness.

"And you'd treat them well?"

I jerk back a little at that. "They would be my child. Of course I would."

"Forgive me for asking the obvious," she shoots back. "I've seen how demons behave here. You can understand my concern."

I step closer, towering over her slight frame, but she doesn't flinch. "You'll find I don't like comparisons."

"I've gathered," she agrees, looking up at me with those sharp green eyes.

Something warm unfurls in my chest at her words, at the way she's studying me like a

puzzle she's determined to solve. This isn't the reaction I expected when I formulated this plan. I thought there would be grateful tears, perhaps fearful acceptance. Not this... banter.

"Is that a yes?" I press, needing her answer.

Trinity's eyes drift to the dark horizon beyond the garden walls. "Better the demon I don't know than the ones I do, I suppose."

Her crude acceptance shouldn't please me so much. "Not exactly a ringing endorsement."

"Were you expecting poetry, Vaelrix?" She smiles, and this time it reaches her eyes. A real smile, small but genuine, and something in me loosens at the sight of it.

"You could try for slightly less backhanded," I suggest, surprised at the lightness in my own tone.

"I could, but where's the fun in that?" She crosses her arms, but her posture has relaxed. "You want honesty? Fine. Yes. I accept your offer, demon."

The agreement settles between us, weighted with consequence. I expected to feel satisfaction, perhaps triumph at securing what I came for. Instead, something dangerously close to relief floods my system, alongside another emotion I refuse to examine.

"Good," I manage, my voice rougher than intended.

Trinity tilts her head. "You seem surprised I agreed."

"Not surprised." I collect myself, schooling my features into neutrality. "Merely

satisfied with the outcome."

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"Mmm." She doesn't look convinced. "Well, don't get too satisfied yet. Getting me off this floating island won't be simple."

"Leave that to me." I gesture toward the path leading back to the compound. "Get your belongings. We leave tonight."

"Tonight?" Her eyebrows shoot up. "That's... fast."

"Is there something keeping you here?"

"No," she answers quickly. "Just my girls—the other humans. I need to say goodbye." I can tell she doesn't want to leave, probably feels guilty too, but she can't keep giving parts of herself to save others. She has to know she won't keep surviving. Maybe that's why she agreed to this in the first place.

I nod, strangely moved by her loyalty. "Lead the way."

Trinity hesitates for just a moment before turning, and I fall into step beside her. We walk in companionable silence through the moonlit gardens, and I find myself studying her profile. The defiant tilt of her chin, the quiet determination in her stride.

I've had countless blood-soaked missions, faced enemies that would make most demons tremble. Yet somehow, walking beside this slender human woman feels distinctly like one of the most consequential decisions of my long life.

I shove the thought away, reminding myself this is business—a transaction beneficial to us both. Nothing more.

But as Trinity glances up at me, that small, genuine smile playing at her lips again, I'm not entirely convinced I believe my own lie.

7

VAEL

Trinity's expression hardens as we approach the entrance to the dungeons. The playful spark that had briefly lit her eyes in the garden dims, replaced by something cooler, more calculated. I watch her transformation with fascination—the way her shoulders straighten, her chin lifts, her entire demeanor shifting into the practiced façade I first witnessed.

"Stay close," she murmurs as we reach the entrance to the compound. "And try to look... possessive."

I raise an eyebrow at the instruction, but follow her lead. When we pass the first guard—a hulking brute with curved horns and dull eyes—I let my hand settle at the small of her back. The guard's gaze slides over Trinity with momentary interest before landing on me. Recognition flickers across his features, followed by immediate deference. He steps aside without a word.

Trinity's pulse jumps beneath my palm, but her expression remains neutral. Impressively so.

"They know you," she whispers as we move past the guard station.

"I have a certain reputation." I don't elaborate. Let her imagine what kind of work earns that particular brand of fearful respect. Even here, word of who killed that spineless demon in the alley spread fast.

The dungeons reek of sweat and desperation, the stench growing stronger as Trinity leads me down winding corridors. My jaw clenches at the conditions—dark, damp cells crowded with thin, haunted-looking human women. Some press against the bars as we pass, eyes widening at the sight of Trinity walking freely with a demon. Others shrink back, terror etched into their gaunt faces.

Trinity stops at the largest cell, where perhaps fifteen women huddle together on scattered blankets and threadbare pallets.

"It's me," she calls softly, and the response is immediate—several women rush to the bars, relief washing over their features.

"Trinity!" A young girl with matted blonde hair reaches through the bars, clutching at Trinity's hand. "We thought—when you didn't come back?—"

"I know, Mira." Trinity squeezes the girl's hand. "I'm alright."

Another guard approaches, his eyes narrowing at our presence. "You have business here?"

Before Trinity can respond, I step forward, towering over the lesser demon. "My business isn't your concern."

He shrinks back instantly, muttering apologies. "Of course, sir. Forgive the interruption."

"Open the cell," I command.

The guard fumbles with a ring of keys, hands shaking slightly as he unlocks the heavy door. Trinity slips inside immediately, and I remain at the threshold, watching as the women surround her, touching her arms and face as if confirming she's real.

"I need to collect my things," Trinity explains, breaking away from their embrace to move toward a small bundle tucked into the corner of the cell. Her movements are efficient, practiced, as she gathers what little she owns, which doesn't appear to be much.

"You're leaving?" The girl called Mira asks, voice breaking. "For good?"

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Trinity pauses, her hands stilling on her meager possessions. For a moment, raw indecision flashes across her features. Her gaze sweeps over the assembled women—some barely more than children—and I see the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders.

"I have to," she finally says, her voice soft but firm. "But you should be getting better arrangements soon."

A murmur runs through the group—disbelief, fear, perhaps a sliver of hope.

"With him?" An older woman glances at me, suspicion etched in the lines around her mouth.

Trinity nods, straightening her spine. "Yes. He's... different."

I almost smile at her hesitation. Different. Not good, not kind—just different. At least she's honest.

"But what about Drez'kor?" someone whispers. "He'll be furious when he discovers you're gone."

Trinity's eyes flash at the mention of the captain, her body tensing. I recall the scene in the garden—his hands on her waist, her carefully blank expression. Something possessive and dangerous stirs in my chest.

"Drez'kor won't be a problem," I interject, my voice carrying through the cramped cell. Every human eye turns to me, wary and uncertain. "And conditions here will

improve. The human queen will see to that." Or I'll try to make sure she does.

Trinity nods as she looks at her companions, clasping Mira's hands in hers. "He's right. Things are already changing. You'll be safer now."

But I notice how her fingers tremble slightly, how her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. She wants to believe what she's telling them, but years of cruelty and broken promises have taught her better.

"We need to go," I say quietly, aware that every moment we linger increases the risk of discovery. Not that I can't slaughter everyone to get her out, but it would complicate my future endeavors on the island. "Now."

Trinity nods, gathering her bundle to her chest. She embraces each woman quickly, whispering something in their ears. When she reaches Mira, the youngest of the group, she presses the small book into the girl's hands.

"Keep this safe for me," she murmurs, and the girl nods solemnly, clutching the book to her chest.

"Will we ever see you again?" Mira asks, tears tracking down her dirty cheeks.

Trinity hesitates, glancing up at me before answering. "I don't know," she admits. "But you'll be alright. You're stronger than you think."

The parting is quick after that. Trinity steps from the cell, her shoulders squared, chin high. But I catch the way her breath hitches, the dampness in her eyes that she blinks away before anyone can notice.

The guard locks the cell behind us, and I place my hand at Trinity's back again, guiding her away. She walks stiffly, not looking back though I can feel how

desperately she wants to.

"You did what you could for them," I say quietly as we climb the stairs away from the dungeons.

Trinity's jaw tightens. "It wasn't enough."

"It was more than anyone else did."

She glances up at me, anger and grief warring in her expression. "That's a pretty low bar, demon."

We emerge from the dungeons without incident, no one stopping us or questioning why I'm escorting a human woman away from the premises. Trinity seems increasingly agitated by this, her steps quickening as we near the edge of Asmodeus's property.

"I can't believe no one's trying to stop us," she whispers, casting furtive glances over her shoulder. "It can't be this easy."

"It isn't easy," I correct her. "It's who I am. No one here wants to challenge me."

She studies me with those shrewd green eyes. "You must be very frightening."

"I am."

A small, humorless smile touches her lips. "And yet here I am, walking into the night with you. What does that make me?"

"Practical," I answer honestly. "And brave."

The journey to my estate on Aerasak is swift but silent. Trinity spends most of it staring out the window of the transport vessel, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the glass. The tension in her shoulders never quite leaves, even as we put Galmoleth far behind us.

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When we finally land on the outskirts of Ikoth, her eyes widen at the perpetual crimson sky, the rich black soil, the strange metallic plants that glitter under the alien sun.

"Welcome to Aerasak," I say, guiding her down the ramp. "Different from what you're used to."

Trinity steps onto the dark soil, her gaze sweeping across the unfamiliar landscape. "It's called Ikoth, right? The demon homeland?"

"You've been paying attention." I'm oddly pleased by this. "This is the southwestern region, less populated than the cities. I prefer it that way."

As we approach my estate, I watch her reaction carefully. The structure rises from the landscape like a natural formation—black stone and gleaming metal twined together in elegant, angular patterns. No neighbors for miles, just dense forest with their strange, dark-leaved trees surrounding the property on three sides. A private oasis, far from prying eyes.

Trinity's expression gives little away, but her pulse quickens. "It's... secluded."

"That's the point." I lead her through the massive front doors, which swing open at my approach. "No one bothers me here."

Inside, the space opens up to high ceilings and wide windows that frame the crimson sky. The furnishings are minimal but well-crafted—dark woods, metal accents, comfortable seating arranged around a central hearth. Weapons hang on the walls,

trophies from successful hunts and contracts. Not warm by human standards, perhaps, but it's home.

"This is where I live when I'm not traveling for work." I gesture for her to explore freely. "And now it's where you'll stay until our arrangement is complete."

Trinity moves through the space cautiously, like she's entering a predator's den. Which, I suppose, she is. Her fingers trail along the back of a chair, eyes cataloging every detail. Always looking for escape routes, this one. Smart.

"It's larger than I expected," she admits. "And... nicer."

"What were you expecting? Chains on the walls? Torture devices?"

Her lips quirk up. "Something like that. Demons aren't exactly known for their hospitality."

"We appreciate comfort as much as anyone." I move past her to throw open another set of doors, revealing a long corridor. "Your quarters are this way."

I show her to a suite of rooms on the eastern side of the house, well-appointed with a large bed, bathing chamber, and private sitting area. The windows overlook a garden of strange, metallic-hued flowers that catch the light of Aerasak's sun.

"This is... mine?" Disbelief colors her voice as she moves into the space, touching the plush bedding with hesitant fingers.

"For as long as you're here," I confirm. "The rest of the house is yours to explore at your leisure, except my private chambers and the weapons room."

Trinity turns to me, arms folded across her chest. Her initial awe fades, replaced by

that calculating look I'm beginning to recognize.

"Let's talk about this contract," she says firmly. "I need to know exactly what I'm agreeing to."

I lean against the doorframe, appreciating her directness. "Simple enough. You'll bear my heir. Stay here during the pregnancy and until you've healed completely. After that, you're free to go." She asked if she'd have rights, but she never said what she wanted. If she would want to be a mother at all.

I can't imagine she'd want to continue sacrificing for others, but I won't take that choice from her.

"And the child?"

"Stays with me."

Her shoulders relax a fraction. "Good."

I study her reaction, intrigued. "Most would find that a difficult condition."

Trinity shakes her head, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. "I never wanted to be a mother. Even before..." She gestures vaguely, encompassing her captivity and everything that led her to this moment.

"Would you want any part in the child's life? Visitation?"

"No." Her answer is swift, unhesitating. "A clean break is better. For everyone."

I nod, oddly relieved by her certainty. "Then we part ways after. I got you off Galmoeth, and I'll set you up with a new lifewherever you choose to go. Resources,

housing, everything you need."

Trinity's expression shifts, a brief flash of something—hope, maybe—crossing her features before she schools them into neutrality again. "That simple?"

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"That simple." I straighten from the doorframe. "You fulfill your end of the bargain, I fulfill mine. No complications."

She nods, a tight smile forming on her lips. "Sounds perfect. This should be easy for the both of us."

Easy. The word hangs between us, and I almost believe it. Almost.

But I have a feeling that nothing with her will be easy.

8

TRINITY

Vael straightens from the doorframe, his massive frame blocking most of the light from the corridor. The crimson Aerasak sky casts strange highlights across his ash-gray skin, turning the sharp planes of his face into something almost beautiful in its alienness.

"I'll leave you to wash up and rest," he says, already turning to go. "There are clothes in the wardrobe. I sent word ahead to have it stocked. We can discuss more details tomorrow."

"Wait." The word slips out before I can stop myself.

He pauses, those unsettling red-gold eyes fixing on me with a predator's focus.

My heart hammers against my ribs. This moment—right here—is what I'm good at. All my training, all my careful study of men's desires, has led me here. I know my role. I understand the transaction. It would be wrong of me not to uphold it now that he has me in his house.

I rise from the bed with practiced grace, closing the distance between us. His heat radiates against me, a physical force all its own. I slide my hand up his chest, feeling the solid muscle beneath the fabric of his shirt.

"Why are you leaving so soon?" I ask, modulating my voice to that perfect balance of innocent and provocative that I've spent years perfecting.

My fingers trace the edge of his collar, a whisper of contact that usually makes men shudder with anticipation. Vael remains perfectly still, those eerie vertical pupils dilating slightly as he watches me.

"I thought we could begin our... arrangement tonight," I continue, holding his gaze as I trail my hand lower, across the flat plane of his stomach toward his belt. "No time like the present, right?"

His hand catches mine with startling speed, halting my progress. Not rough, but immovable.

"Trinity." My name on his lips sounds like a warning.

I tilt my head, confusion threading through me. "Isn't this what you want? Why you brought me here?"

Vael leans down until his face is level with mine, close enough that I can feel the warmth of his breath against my cheek. My pulse skitters wildly, prey-instinct screaming danger while something else entirely pools low in my belly.

"Listen carefully," he says, his voice a deep rumble that I feel more than hear. "We have an arrangement, yes. But I'm not interested in whatever performance you're offering right now."

I blink, momentarily thrown off script. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" His thumb traces a small circle on the inside of my wrist where he still holds me, the unexpected gentleness of the gesture making my breath catch. "I've watched you since the moment we met. The mask you wear is impressive—it fooled many others, I'm sure. But not me."

Heat flushes my cheeks, embarrassment and something like anger tangling in my chest. "This isn't a mask. It's who I am."

"No." The certainty in his voice unnerves me. "It's who you've had to be. There's a difference."

I try to pull my hand away, but he holds firm. Not hurting me, just... keeping me there, in this moment I can't seem to navigate.

"What do you want from me, then?" My voice emerges sharper than intended.

Vael's lips curve into something not quite a smile. "I want you to stop treating this like another transaction where your body is the currency." He releases my wrist finally, but doesn't step back. "I can smell your fear beneath the arousal you're forcing yourself to feel. It's... distasteful."

The bluntness of his assessment lands like a slap. I take a step back, wrapping my arms around myself.

"You don't know anything about me," I whisper.

"I know enough." His gaze slides over me, not lascivious but assessing. "I know there's attraction between us—real attraction. It's written all over you—when you're too busy being irritated or curious instead of scared of what I'll do to you."

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My breath catches in my throat at his words, at the impossible accuracy of them. I don't know how to respond to this demon who sees through my carefully constructed façade like it's made of glass.

"We might be in an arrangement, but I'm not interested in having transactional sex with you," Vael continues, his voice low and certain.

"Then what do you want?" I challenge, desperate to regain some control of the situation.

He leans closer again, and this time I force myself to stand my ground despite the hammering of my heart.

"I want you to be real with me." His breath ghosts against my ear, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine. "When you're not playing at desire but actually feeling it. I don't want your body offered as payment, Trinity. I'll only fuck you when you're begging me for it—and meaning every word. I can breed you while you enjoy it."

The crude language paired with such intensity makes heat flood my face. No one has ever spoken to me this way—direct, demanding authenticity rather than the illusion of it.

His eyes scan over me, thoughtful and intense. Those vertical pupils dilate slightly in the dimming light, and I wonder if he can detect the way my desire is starting to flare beneath my confusion and fear—not manufactured this time, but real and unwanted and impossible to deny.

Before I can formulate a response, Vael moves with that unnatural demon speed. Suddenly my back is against the wall, his massive frame caging me in without touching me. He braces one arm above my head, leaning down until our faces are mere inches apart.

"Tell me honestly," he growls, voice rougher than before. "Do you want me to kiss you right now because of our arrangement?" His free hand hovers near my face, not quite touching. "Or because some part of you actually wants me?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. I could lie—I've become so good at it, after all. But something about the way he's looking at me, like he's peeling back all my layers to the vulnerable core beneath, makes me reckless with honesty.

"I want you." The confession comes out hoarse, barely audible. "Not because of any arrangement."

Something flashes in those predatory eyes—satisfaction, hunger, something I can't name. Then his mouth crashes against mine, swallowing my gasp of surprise.

There's nothing gentle about this kiss. It's possession, pure and simple. His lips are hot, demanding, claiming mine with an intensity that steals my breath. I've been kissed countless times, but never like this—never like I'm something precious and wild that he's determined to tame.

My hands find purchase against his chest, feeling the impossible heat of him through the fabric. His tongue slides against mine, and I moan into his mouth, the sound embarrassingly needy. When his teeth graze my bottom lip, a jolt of pleasure-pain shoots straight to my core.

I'm dizzy with it, drunk on the taste and feel of him. I arch instinctively, seeking more contact, and he responds by pressing me harder against the wall, one thigh sliding

between my legs.

After what feels like forever and not nearly long enough, he breaks the kiss, leaving me gasping for air. His forehead rests against mine, his breathing just as ragged as my own.

"Strip," he commands, the single word vibrating through me like a physical touch.

I blink up at him, dazed and hesitant. This is familiar territory—being commanded, being naked and vulnerable while a fully clothed man takes his pleasure. But something in the way Vael looks at me feels different from anything I've experienced before.

My fingers fumble with the fastening of my clothing, suddenly clumsy under his intense gaze. I shed each layer slowly, half-expecting him to grow impatient and take over. He doesn't. He watches with that same burning focus, tracking every inch of skin I reveal with those unsettling eyes.

When I stand naked before him, I fight the urge to cover myself. I've never been shy about my body—it's been my weapon, my currency, my only value for so long. But Vael's scrutiny makes me feel exposed in ways that have nothing to do with my lack of clothing.

I expect him to spin me around, to bend me over something and thrust into me the way most men do—efficient, impersonal, focused solely on their own pleasure.

Instead, he drops to his knees before me.

The sight of this powerful demon kneeling at my feet sends a shock of confusion through me. "What are you?—"

His hands grasp my thighs, and he lifts one of my legs over his shoulder, opening me to him. "Hold onto me," he growls, his breath hot against my most intimate place.

"I don't understand what you're—" My words cut off in a strangled cry as his mouth closes over me.

The sensation is so foreign, so unexpected, I nearly collapse. No one has ever done this to me before—put their mouth on me, tasted me like I'm some rare delicacy. His tongue flicks against that sensitive bundle of nerves, and my fingers clutch desperately at his horns to keep myself upright.

"Vael," I gasp, not even sure if I'm protesting or begging.

He growls against me, the vibration adding another layer to the overwhelming sensations. His hands grip my hips, holding me in place as his tongue explores every fold and crease of me with devastating precision.

"You taste even better than I imagined," he murmurs against me, the words sending another shock of pleasure through my system.

I'm trembling now, caught between the cold wall at my back and the scorching heat of his mouth. Every stroke of his tongue builds something inside me, a tension coiling tighter and tighter until I'm certain I'll shatter.

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I can't breathe, can't think, can only feel as Vael's mouth works me with single-minded determination. His tongue traces maddening patterns against my sensitive flesh, alternating between broad strokes and focused attention on that bundle of nerves that's turning me into a quivering mess.

"Vael," I gasp again, my fingers clutching his horns for purchase. The strange texture of them—smooth yet ridged—grounds me somehow as pleasure builds to nearly unbearable heights.

One of his hands slides from my hip down my thigh, then back up along the curve of my inner thigh. I feel his finger teasing at my entrance, just circling, not pushing in yet.

"Please," I hear myself beg, not even recognizing my own voice—raw and desperate.

I've faked pleasure countless times, manufactured moans and begging to hurry things along. But this—this mindless pleading—is embarrassingly real. I'm not performing now. I couldn't if I tried.

His finger slides inside me at the same moment his tongue flicks rapidly against my clit, and the dual sensations make my legs buckle. Only his arm around my waist keeps me upright as he adds a second finger, stretching me deliciously while his mouth continues its relentless assault.

The tension coils impossibly tighter, a spring wound to the breaking point. When he curls his fingers inside me, finding some spot I didn't even know existed, everything shatters. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, stealing my breath and

vision as my body convulses around his fingers.

I'm barely aware of the sounds I'm making—half-sobbing, half-moaning his name—as he works me through the climax, not stopping until I'm shaking and oversensitive, weakly pushing at his head.

Slowly, Vael rises to his feet, his movements fluid and predatory. His lips glisten with evidence of my pleasure, and the sight sends another aftershock through me. He doesn't wipe his mouth. Instead, he licks his lips slowly, savoring, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You're exquisite when you come apart," he says, voice rough with desire. "I want to see it again. And again."

I'm still trembling, my legs barely supporting me as I lean against the wall. The vulnerability I feel has nothing to do with my nakedness and everything to do with how thoroughly he's dismantled my carefully constructed walls.

And yet, I want more.

His eyes soak me in, his nostrils flaring, and I swear he fucking knows It.

"If I lay you out on that bed," he asks, one finger tracing the line of my collarbone, "will it be because of our arrangement? Or because you want me inside you?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with meaning. He's giving me another chance to be honest—with him and with myself.

I swallow hard, looking up at him. His massive frame towers over me, all hard muscle and sharp angles, yet I don't feel afraid. What I feel is a hunger that has nothing to do with survival and everything to do with wanting.

"I want you," I admit, my voice barely a whisper. "Gods help me, I want you inside me."

Something flares in his eyes—satisfaction, desire, something darker I can't name.

"Say it properly," he demands, his hand sliding up to cup my jaw. "I want to hear you beg for it. Really beg, not the practiced lines you've used on others."

Heat floods my face, both embarrassment and arousal tangling in my chest. I've never had to genuinely beg for anything sexual—it's always been an act, a performance to stroke a man's ego.

But the ache between my legs is real, the emptiness almost painful now that I know what his fingers feel like inside me. And something about the intensity in his gaze makes me reckless with honesty.

"Please," I breathe, my hands sliding up his still-clothed chest. "Please, Vael. I want you in me. I need it."

A growl rumbles through his chest, and he lifts me as if I weigh nothing, carrying me toward the bed. "Much better," he murmurs against my ear. "But I think you can do even better than that."

As he lays me out on the plush bedding, a thought crashes through the haze of my desire. "Wait," I say, pressing a hand against his chest. "I should tell you—I won't get pregnant. I've been taking a tonic for a while. It was the only way I could... protect myself."

Vael pauses, looking down at me with something unreadable in his expression. For a moment, I worry I've broken whatever spell has fallen over us by mentioning the reality of my captivity.

But then his lips curve into that not-quite-smile. "Trinity," he says, my name like a caress on his tongue, "I'm eager to have you either way." His hand slides up my bare thigh, leaving trails of fire in its wake. "Right now, all I care about is making you fall apart around me."

His eyes lock with mine as he shifts back from where he's laid me, something predatory and possessive in his gaze that sends a fresh wave of heat through me. I've been with many men, but never have I felt so completely seen—not just my body, but something deeper, as though he's looking straight through to the core of me.

"Don't move," Vael commands, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through my bones.

I nod mutely, watching as he steps back and begins to undress. Each movement is deliberate, unhurried. He doesn't perform or tease—this isn't about putting on a show. It's simply efficient, and somehow that's more arousing than any calculated striptease.

He pulls his shirt over his head, revealing the expanse of his ash-gray chest—broad and sculpted with muscle that ripples as he moves. Dark markings swirl across his skin, following the contours of his body in patterns that seem to shift in the dim light.

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My mouth goes dry as he unfastens his pants, pushing them down powerful thighs. When he straightens, fully nude, I can't help the small gasp that escapes me.

He's magnificent—and intimidating. Every inch of him screams predator, from the sharp angles of his face to the powerful build of his body. And between his legs... I swallow hard, a mixture of desire and trepidation coursing through me. He's proportional to his massive frame, thick and hard, the head already glistening with evidence of his arousal.

"See something you like?" A smirk plays across his lips as he catches me staring.

"You're beautiful," I whisper, the honesty of the statement surprising even me. I've complimented men's bodies before, said whatever they wanted to hear, but this—this is real.

His smirk deepens as he approaches the bed, moving with lethal grace. "Beautiful? I've been called many things, little human, but never that."

The mattress dips under his weight as he crawls over me, caging me between powerful arms. His heat radiates against my skin, making me arch instinctively toward him.

"Hands above your head," he growls.

I comply instantly, raising my arms over my head. He captures both wrists in one large hand, pinning them to the mattress. The position leaves me completely exposed to him, vulnerable in a way that should frighten me—but instead sends another rush

of wet heat between my thighs.

"Look at you," Vael murmurs, his free hand tracing a path from my throat down between my breasts, over my stomach. "Sofucking perfect." His palm spans almost the entire width of my ribcage, a stark reminder of the difference in our sizes.

When his fingers dip between my legs again, finding me slick and ready, I can't help the moan that escapes me.

"Already so wet for me," he says, voice dropping to a growl. "Tell me what you want, Trinity."

"You," I gasp as his thumb circles my clit. "I want you inside me."

He positions himself at my entrance, the blunt head of him pressing against me but not pushing in. "Like this?" he teases, barely breaching me before withdrawing.

"Please," I whimper, trying to arch up against him.

His grip on my wrists tightens, not painful but unmistakably restraining. He leans down, his mouth hot against my ear. "I'm going to fuck you until you can't remember your own name," he whispers, the crude words sending a shiver down my spine. "Until the only thing you can say is mine."

With one powerful thrust, he pushes inside me, stretching me almost to the point of pain. I cry out, the sensation overwhelming—fullness and pressure and a pleasure so intense it borders on agony.

"Fuck," he grunts, holding still once he's fully seated. "So tight. So perfect."

I'm panting, adjusting to the intrusion, the stretch of him. When I try to move, seeking

friction, his hand tightens on my wrists.

"Not yet," he growls. "I want you to feel every inch of me."

He withdraws slowly, the drag of him against my inner walls making me tremble, then pushes back in with measured control. The gentleness surprises me—I expected him to be rough, to take what he wanted without concern for my pleasure.

"More," I plead, wrapping my legs around his waist. "Harder."

A dark chuckle vibrates through his chest. "So demanding." But he increases his pace, driving into me with more force. Each thrust pushes me up the bed, would send me sliding away if not for his grip on my wrists anchoring me in place.

"Is this what you needed?" he growls, punctuating each word with a snap of his hips. "My cock filling you up? Stretching this sweet little cunt?"

The filthy words in that cultured voice make me clench around him, drawing a groan from deep in his chest.

"Yes," I gasp, meeting his thrusts as best I can in this position. "Gods, yes."

He shifts, angling his hips to hit a spot inside me that makes white-hot pleasure burst behind my eyes. "Right there," I cry out. "Please, don't stop."

"I can feel how close you are," he murmurs, his rhythm never faltering. "Squeezing me so tight. You're going to come on my cock, aren't you, Trinity?"

I nod frantically, beyond words as tension builds inside me, coiling tighter and tighter with each thrust.

"Let me hear you," he demands, releasing my wrists to grip my hips with both hands. "Say it."

My arms immediately wrap around his shoulders, nails digging into his back. "I'm going to come," I pant, the words broken between gasps. "You're going to make me come."

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One of his hands slides between our bodies, finding my clit with unerring accuracy. His touch is firm, circling in time with his thrusts. "That's it," he growls. "Come for me. Now."

The command, combined with the dual stimulation, sends me hurtling over the edge. Pleasure crashes through me in waves, more intense than anything I've ever experienced. My body locks around him, inner muscles clenching rhythmically as I cry out his name.

"Fuck, Trinity," Vael groans, his thrusts becoming erratic. "You feel so good. I'm going to?—"

With a final, powerful thrust, he buries himself deep inside me, his body shuddering as he finds his own release. I feel the pulsing of him, the heat of his seed filling me as he collapses against me, careful even in this moment not to crush me with his weight.

And I try really hard not to, but I feel a little trickle of emotion spread through me before I crush in an iron fist. I can't get attached.

I won't.

9

TRINITY

I wake to sunlight streaming through unfamiliar windows, the crimson Aerasak sky casting a bloody glow across the plush bedding tangled around my legs. For one

disorienting moment, I can't remember where I am—not in the dungeons, not on the cold stone floor surrounded by other captive women.

My body aches in strange places. Between my legs, a pleasant soreness reminds me of what happened last night. With Vael. The demon who now owns me.

I sit up too quickly and wince, my muscles protesting after activities they haven't engaged in for quite some time—at least not like that. Never like that. It's a different kind of soreness knowing I wanted it.

The room around me is spacious and well-appointed, nothing like the cramped, filthy cells I've grown accustomed to. A wardrobe of dark wood stands against one wall, and plush rugs cover the stone floor. It's beautiful, in a severe, minimalist way that seems to fit what I've learned of demon aesthetics so far.

But it's the bed that truly startles me—wide enough for three people, with linens softer than anything I've felt since being taken from Protheke—even before that. I run my fingers over the fabric, marveling at its smoothness.

No one is watching me.

The thought hits suddenly, making my breath catch. For months, there has always been someone—guards, other women, demons visiting the dungeons to leer at us. Never a moment truly alone, never privacy.

I slide from the bed, my bare feet meeting cool stone, and make my way to the wardrobe Vael had mentioned. Inside hang several garments in varying dark shades—blacks, deep purples, midnight blues. Very demon, but the sizing looks approximately right for my human frame.

I select a deep violet tunic and black leggings, both made from a fabric that flows like

water between my fingers. The tunic has strange silver fasteners along one side that take me a moment to figure out, but once donned, it fits surprisingly well, if a bit loose around the shoulders.

As I dress, questions tumble through my mind. What now? What is expected of me? Last night was... not what I anticipated. Not transactional, as he'd said. But what does that make me? Still a breeder? A concubine? Something else entirely?

My stomach growls, breaking through my spiraling thoughts. Food. I need food first, then I can worry about defining my new position in this demon's household.

I pad barefoot from the room, trying to remember the layout Vael had briefly shown me the previous day. The hallway outside my chamber stretches in both directions, lined with doors of various sizes and decorated with strange metal sculptures that seem to move slightly in my peripheral vision.

Following the scent of something cooking—unfamiliar but enticing—I make my way down a curved staircase and along another corridor before finding myself at the entrance to what appears to be a kitchen.

I step inside, drawn by the delicious aroma, and freeze mid-stride.

A demon woman stands at the large stone counter, her back to me as she works over some sort of cooking surface. She's tall—not as imposing as Vael, but still towering over what a human woman's height would be. Her skin is a lighter shade of gray than Vael's, almost silvery in the morning light with blue undertones, and instead of hair, a mane of what looks like spun platinum falls down her back in elaborate braids interwoven with small metal charms that clink softly as she moves.

Most startling are her horns—delicate compared to Vael's massive ones, curving up from her temples and then forward in elegant spirals that remind me of the twisted

shells sometimes found on Protheka's beaches.

She turns suddenly, sensing my presence with that unnerving demon awareness, and I gasp involuntarily.

Her eyes are a pale violet, and I hate that now that I'm really taking her in, she's pretty. Like, really pretty. What I don't understand is who she is or why I'm here if Vael hasher.

I hate the feeling that starts to work its way under my skin, and I ignore it.

The demon woman's eyes sweep over me, her lips thinning into a line so tight they nearly disappear. She doesn't say anything at first, just assesses me with a gaze that feels like an icy knife sliding between my ribs.

"So," she finally says, her voice melodic despite the edge to it, "you're the human."

The way she says 'human' makes it sound like 'vermin.' I straighten my spine, refusing to cower. I've spent too many months perfecting the art of appearing unafraid when I'm terrified.

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"I am," I reply, matching her coolness. "And you are...?"

She turns back to whatever she's cooking—something that smells like roasted meat and unfamiliar spices.

"Domemri. I manage this household." She stirs something in a large pot. "Have for many seasons."

Before I can respond, heavy footsteps approach from behind me. My pulse quickens even before I turn, recognizing the cadence of Vael's stride.

He fills the doorway, dressed in dark leathers that hug his muscular frame. His gaze flicks between Domemri and me, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

"You've met," he observes, voice neutral. He doesn't reach for me or acknowledge what happened between us the night before. Why would he? What did I expect—for him to sweep me into his arms in front of his... servant? Friend? Something else?

"Vaelrix," Domemri practically purrs, her entire demeanor shifting. She straightens, shoulders back, the movement emphasizing the elegant curve of her neck. "I've prepared gormash with dreelek. Your favorite."

I shift uncomfortably, feeling like an outsider watching a familiar ritual. She knows his favorite foods. Of course she does.

Vael grunts in acknowledgment, his attention shifting to me. "Hungry?"

"Yes," I reply, then belatedly add, "Thank you."

The three of us settle at a table carved from what appears to be a single massive slab of ebony stone. Domemri serves Vael first, placing a steaming bowl before him with a flourish that brings her close enough that her arm brushes his shoulder. He doesn't react, but she lingers a moment longer than necessary.

She serves me last, the bowl landing with a dull thunk that nearly sloshes the contents over the rim.

The meal passes in uncomfortable silence. The food—chunks of meat in a savory broth with unfamiliar vegetables—is delicious, but I barely taste it, too aware of the simmering tension. Domemri watches Vael with naked longing while pretending I don't exist. Vael eats with single-minded focus, offering no conversation.

When he finishes, he rises abruptly. "I have matters to attend to. I'll return later."

I set down my spoon and follow him from the kitchen, feeling Domemri's glare burning into my back.

Once we're in a corridor far from the kitchen, I touch his arm. "Wait."

He stops, turning to face me. His expression is unreadable, red-gold eyes narrowed slightly.

"Who is she?" I ask, hating the uncertain quaver in my voice. "Really."

"I told you. She?—"

"You told me someone would cook and clean," I interrupt, then immediately regret my boldness. But Vael doesn't strike me or even snap at me. He simply watches,

waiting for me to continue.

I take a breath. "You didn't say it would be another female demon who looks at you like she wants to devour you."

A flicker of something—amusement?—crosses his face. "Jealous, little human?"

"No," I lie. "Confused. If you have her, why did you choose me from the dungeons?"

Vael leans against the cool stone wall, crossing his arms. "Domemri works for me. She cleans, she cooks. That's all."

"That's not how she sees it."

"What Domemri sees isn't my concern."

I press my lips together, uncertain why this bothers me so much. I'm property, not a partner. What do I care if Vael beds every demon female in Aerasak?

Yet something in my chest twists at the thought.

"She looks at you like she owns you," I murmur.

Vael's laugh is sharp and sudden. "No one owns me."

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I raise my eyebrows. "So you've never...?"

"I didn't say that." He pushes off from the wall, stepping closer until he looms over me. "But she doesn't own me. And she knows it. And you were the one I was buried deep inside last night." His finger traces the line of my jaw. "Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

It doesn't, but I nod anyway, fighting the urge to lean into his touch. I have no claim on him, and I need to remember that. No matter what happened last night.

It'll happen many more times, and I cannot afford for my heart to get wrapped up in this. He asked for real, but I can't let it get too real.

10

VAEL

I track the satyr through Aerasak's eastern forest, following the distinctive cloven prints stamped in red soil. Three days I've been after this mark—Markos Silvershod, wanted for theft of magical artifacts from Ti'lith's central archives. Worth fifteen nodals to the right client.

The forest canopy filters the crimson sunlight into dappled shadows. Perfect hunting conditions. I keep low, moving with the deliberate stealth that's kept me alive for thirty-seven years. The metal hilts of my twin daggers press comfortably against my lower back, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

A branch snaps somewhere ahead. I freeze, listening.

This satyr has eluded other hunters for weeks. But they weren't me.

I creep forward, scanning the metallic foliage. Through a break in the trees, I spot movement—a flash of furry hindquarters, the nervous flick of a tail. Got him.

I circle wide, positioning myself to cut off his most likely escape route. As I move, unbidden thoughts of Trinity slip into my mind—the way her green eyes had widened when she'd first seen my home, how her small hand had felt in mine. The memory of her beneath me, her soft cries as I?—

Focus, idiot.

I shake my head, irritated at my own distraction. This has been happening since I brought her home. Five days, and I can't seem to go more than an hour without her invading my thoughts. It's... inconvenient.

The satyr pauses in a small clearing ahead, his humanoid torso tense as he surveys his surroundings. His curved horns catch the light as he turns his head. He's nervous. Good.

I slide forward silently, calculating distance and timing. Twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten.

When I'm close enough to smell the musky scent of his fur, I deliberately step on a dry twig.

He whirls, eyes wild. "Who's there?"

I rise from my crouch, letting him see me fully. "Markos Silvershod."

The satyr's face contorts with recognition and fear. "Vaelrix."

My reputation precedes me. "The archives want their artifacts back."

"I sold them." His eyes dart between me and the thick brush to his left—his planned escape route. "Weeks ago."

I shrug one shoulder. "Not my problem. The bounty doesn't specify condition upon delivery."

He bolts for the brush, exactly as I anticipated. I'm on him in three strides, driving my shoulder into his midsection. We crash to the forest floor, leaves and twigs crunching beneath our combined weight.

The satyr fights with desperate strength, hooves kicking wildly, hands clawing at my face. I catch one flailing arm and twist it behind his back, pressing my knee between his shoulder blades.

"You'll break my arm!" he gasps.

I increase the pressure. "Probably."

As I secure him with enchanted bindings around his wrists and ankles, I notice the fading light. Night will fall soon. We'll need shelter.

"Move," I command, hauling him to his feet.

We make our way through the darkening forest, the satyr stumbling ahead of me. I shove him forward when he slows, my patience wearing thin.

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"The mighty Vaelrix," he spits over his shoulder. "Reduced to chasing petty thieves."

I don't respond to the bait. My reputation is built on results, not conversation.

"Heard you turned down the Obsidian contract." He lets out a pained laugh when I tighten my grip. "Strange choice. That was big nodals."

I had turned it down. The week I'd spotted Trinity at Asmodeus's gathering. I couldn't explain why, even to myself. The thought of leaving Galmoleth before securing her had been... unacceptable.

"Shut up and walk," I growl.

We reach a small cave as darkness settles. I secure the satyr to a jutting rock and build a small fire. As the flames rise, casting flickering shadows across the stone walls, my thoughts drift again to Trinity.

Is she adapting to my home? Has Domemri poisoned her food yet? The tension between them had been palpable, and I'm not sure why. Not sure how to fix that, either.

I'd left without proper explanation, without telling Trinity when I'd return. The realization bothers me more than it should. She isn't owed explanations. She's carrying my heir—that's the arrangement.

Yet I find myself wondering what she's doing right now. Is she comfortable? Is she eating enough? Is she lonely?

Am I lonely?

The question ambushes me, unwelcome and revealing. I stare into the fire, suddenly aware of a hollow feeling I've carried for longer than I care to admit. The satyr shifts, drawing my attention back to reality.

"You seem distracted, demon," he observes. "Not like the stories."

I fix him with a cold stare. "The stories don't mention how I cut out the tongues of marks who talk too much."

He falls silent, eyes wide.

I settle against the opposite wall, one dagger drawn and resting across my knee. I should rest, but my mind keeps circling back to Trinity—to the taste of her skin, the sound of her laughter, genuine and unguarded in those few moments when she'd forgotten to be afraid of me.

One taste and I'm acting like a lovesick fool. Pathetic.

Tomorrow I'll deliver this satyr, collect my nodals, and return home. To her. The thought brings a satisfaction I'm not ready to examine too closely.

I return home as dusk settles over Ikoth, my body weary from the hunt but mind strangely alert. The bounty collection went smoothly—fifteen nodals for Markos, who'll spend the next decade in a Ti'lith cell. Fair trade.

The house is quiet as I enter, dropping my weapons belt on the hook by the door. Dried blood crusts my knuckles and forearms—not mine—and dust from the journey clings to my skin.

"Welcome back."

Domemri stands in the kitchen doorway, her pale violet eyes assessing me. She wears a simple black dress that accentuates her slender form, her white-blonde hair braided with those little metal charms that chime when she moves.

"Is she awake?" I ask, not bothering with pleasantries.

Something flickers across Domemri's face. "Yes. She ate dinner an hour ago. I left water in your bathing chamber."

I nod, already moving toward the stairs. "I won't need anything else tonight."

"Of course." Her tone is perfectly measured, but I catch the subtle tightening of her jaw. Not my problem.

My bathing chamber is dark until I mutter the incantation that lights the sconces. Steam rises from the large basin, casting ghostly shapes in the dim light. I strip quickly and sink into the hot water, letting it sluice away the grime of the hunt.

As I wash, my thoughts keep circling back to Trinity. She's here, in my home, likely waiting in her room. The knowledge stirs something primal in me, a possessiveness I'm unaccustomed to feeling.

It's purely physical, I remind myself. A natural response to a compatible breeding partner. Especially since we've become accustomed to this, to me visiting her most nights and us finding our pleasure together. But that is all it is. Nothing more.

I rise from the bath and dry myself, pulling on clean black pants but leaving my chest bare. My reflection catches my eye—ash-gray skin, the thick horns that crown my head, red-gold eyes that mark me as a predator. A demon, through and through.

And she is so very human.

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I move through the darkened hallway to her suite of rooms. No point in delaying. This preoccupation with her will pass once the novelty wears off. It has to.

I knock once, then enter without waiting for a response.

Trinity sits by the window, a book open in her lap. The crimson light of Aerasak's setting sun bathes her in an otherworldly glow, turning her brown hair to liquid copper. She wears a simple silk nightgown—one I'd had delivered for her—that drapes over her curves like water.

She looks up, those green eyes widening slightly. "You're back."

"Disappointed?" I move into the room, closing the door behind me.

She sets the book aside and rises. "Should I be?"

Since I brought her here, Trinity has become marginally more comfortable in my presence. She has less bite, not that I minded it before. But it seems to be developing into something that is only drawing me in more.

"The hunt was successful," I say, though I doubt she cares.

"I can tell." She gestures to a shallow cut on my shoulder I hadn't noticed. "You're injured."

"It's nothing."

She approaches, stopping just beyond arm's reach. "Did you help them? The other girls."

This is our routine now. Sex, but first, questions about the humans in Asmodeus's dungeons. Her loyalty to them is... unexpected. Admirable, even.

"I spoke with Asmodeus before I left. He's agreed to improve their conditions while he determines what to do with them."

Relief softens her features. "Thank you."

I close the distance between us, unable to resist any longer. My hand cups her cheek, thumb tracing the delicate curve of her jawline. "I didn't do it for thanks."

"Why did you do it, then?" she asks, her pulse quickening beneath my touch.

I don't answer. Instead, I lower my mouth to hers, claiming her lips in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly ignites into something hungry and demanding. She responds immediately, her body arching into mine, small hands sliding up my bare chest to my shoulders.

This—this is what I've been missing on the hunt. This heat, this connection that burns away all other considerations.

I lift her easily, carrying her to the bed. Her nightgown whispers across my skin as I lay her down, my larger form covering hers. She sighs as my hands explore, relearning the geography of her body.

"Vael," she breathes against my ear, and the sound of my name on her lips nearly undoes me.

What follows is a haze of pleasure, of skin against skin and breath mingling with breath. I'm relentless in my pursuit of her satisfaction, needing to hear those soft cries, to feel her tremble beneath me. I need her to want this, to want me, with the same intensity that haunts my every waking moment.

And she does. Gods help me, she does.

Afterward, I hold her against me, her head pillowed on my chest, her breathing gradually slowing to normal. This is when I should leave, return to my own chambers as I have every night. As the arrangement dictates.

"Your heartbeat is slowing," she murmurs, one slender finger tracing idle patterns on my skin.

I grunt in response, too content to form words.

"Do you have to go?" The question is quiet, hesitant.

Yes, I think. I should go.

"Soon," I say instead.

She nods against my chest, accepting. Not asking for more than I've offered. That, too, is part of our arrangement. Though most of the time, it feels like I have to keep from asking.

I wait until her breathing deepens with sleep before carefully extracting myself from her embrace. She murmurs something incoherent as I cover her with the blanket, but doesn't wake.

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Standing over her sleeping form, I'm struck by a foreign impulse to climb back in beside her, to wake with her warm body curled against mine. The desire is so strong it's almost physical pain to turn away.

But I do turn away, retrieving my pants from the floor and slipping out of her room like a thief.

In the hallway, I pause, resting my forehead against the cool wood of her door. This obsession will pass, I tell myself. It's merely physical attraction, heightened by compatibility and the knowledge that she carries my heir.

I return to my empty chambers, sprawling across my bed that suddenly seems too large, too cold. Sleep eludes me as I stare at the ceiling, imagining her just down the hall, wondering if she's dreaming.

This will pass, I think again. It has to.

But as dawn breaks outside my window, I'm less convinced than ever.

11

TRINITY

The waves of nausea hit like clockwork—first thing in the morning, sometimes lingering until afternoon. Today marks the third week of this unwelcome ritual, and I'm starting to accept what it means. What we've successfully created.

I curl tighter into the cushioned wicker chair on the back porch, drawing my knees to my chest. The crimson sky of Aerasak stretches above me, clouds drifting like smoke across its alien expanse. Even after a month here, I still find the view disorienting. Beautiful, but wrong somehow. A constant reminder of how far I am from everything I've ever known.

A cool breeze carries the metallic scent of Vael's strange garden—those flowers with petals like hammered copper and stems of living silver. The ones that seem to turn toward me whenever I walk past, as though watching. One more peculiarity in this demon world I'm trying to navigate.

My stomach lurches again. I breathe through it, focusing on the horizon beyond the garden where dense forest begins. Four days since Vael left on another hunt. He didn't say when he'd return—he never does—but this time, I find myself counting the hours. Pathetic, really. He's not my savior or my lover. He's just the demon who's using my body to create his heir.

Still...

When he's here, Domemri keeps her distance. When he's gone, the demon woman makes sure I understand my place.

"Still moping out here?"

Speak of the devil. Literally.

Domemri glides through the doorway, her movements liquid grace. Today she wears a flowing gown the color of bruises, her white-blond hair interwoven with those little metal charms that chime with each step. They catch the light as she approaches, creating tiny rainbows that dance across her translucent skin. She's beautiful in that alien, predatory way that all demons seem to possess.

"I'm not moping," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "Just getting some air."

Her delicate horns—so different from Vael's massive ones—curve elegantly from her temples, spiraling forward like a crown. She tilts her head, pale violet eyes assessing me.

"Air. Of course." Her smile doesn't reach those eyes. "Nothing to do with the fact that you've been running to the bathing chamber to empty your stomach every morning?"

Heat crawls up my neck. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Please." She flicks one hand dismissively, the gesture somehow both elegant and condescending. "I've been tending to this house for years. I know what breeding looks like."

I uncurl my legs and sit straighter, refusing to be physically smaller than I already am. "Then you know I'm fulfilling my end of the arrangement."

Domemri laughs, the sound like breaking glass. "Your 'arrangement.' How quaint." She circles my chair, trailing her fingers along the wicker. "Do you imagine you're special, human? That you've somehow captured his interest beyond your temporary usefulness?"

I keep my expression blank, a skill honed over years of enduring the whims of powerful men. "I don't imagine anything. We have a deal—I provide an heir, he provides my freedom."

"Freedom." She stops directly in front of me, blocking the view. "And where will you go, little breeder? Back to those filthy dungeons where he found you? Or perhaps you think you'll stay here, playing at being mistress of this house?"

My hands curl into fists in my lap. "My plans aren't your concern."

"Vaelrix is my concern." Something dangerous flashes in her eyes, there and gone. "I've watched over him for longer than your pitiful human lifespan. I've tended his wounds, prepared his meals, warmed his bed when needed."

Ah. There it is—the real source of her animosity. My throat tightens with unexpected jealousy, which is ridiculous. Why should I care who Vael has bedded? It's not as though we have any real connection beyond the purely physical.

"Then you should understand better than anyone that this is just business," I say quietly. "Once the child is born and I've recovered, I'll be gone."

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Domemri leans down, bringing her face close to mine. Her scent—like metal left too long in sunlight—fills my nostrils.

"Understand this, human," she whispers. "You are nothing but a vessel. A convenient womb with legs. When your usefulness ends, so will his interest."

I meet her gaze steadily, refusing to flinch. I refuse to let her words settle into me. "You don't need to tell me what I already know."

"Don't I?" She straightens, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from her gown. "The way you look at him suggests otherwise. The way you linger in his spaces when he's gone. Did you think I wouldn't notice you wandering into his study yesterday, touching his things?"

My cheeks burn. I had gone to his study, drawn by some foolish need to feel closer to him in his absence. Had run my fingers over his books, sat in his chair, imagining him there.

"I was bored," I lie. "This place is a prison, regardless of its comforts."

"A prison with very thick walls." Her smile turns cruel. "Walls that could easily muffle screams, should anything... unfortunate happen before Vaelrix returns."

Fear slides cold fingers down my spine, but I force a laugh. "Are you threatening me? You think Vael wouldn't notice if something happened to the woman carrying his child?"

"Accidents befall humans all the time." She shrugs one shoulder. "Especially fragile, clumsy ones like yourself."

The implication hangs in the air between us. I wrap my arms protectively around my middle, a gesture I immediately regret when her eyes track the movement.

"He won't be pleased if you interfere with his plans," I say, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

"His plans?" Domemri's chiming laugh returns. "Sweet, stupid human. His only plan is continuing his bloodline. You're simply the most convenient path at present." She leans close again, her voice dropping to a venomous whisper. "But convenience can change."

My face remains impassive as she straightens and turns to leave, but inside, my mind races. The threat is clear, even if never explicitly stated. Domemri wants me gone, and a demon with millennia to live isn't likely to be patient about getting her way.

"I'm sure we'll see just how quickly it all can soon enough," Domemri says, leaning so close I can feel her breath on my face.

"You'll see nothing of the sort."

The voice cuts through the air like a blade—deep, commanding, and unmistakably Vael's.

My heart leaps traitorously in my chest as I turn to see him standing in the doorway. His massive frame fills the space, shoulders squared and stance wide. The crimson sky behind him frames his silhouette, making the curved horns rising from his head look even more imposing than usual. His midnight hair is windswept, falling in pieces around his face where it's escaped the leather tie at his nape.

Domemri freezes, her back going rigid. She whirls around, the charms in her hair creating a cascade of tinkling sounds. "Vaelrix! You've returned earlier than expected." Her voice shifts into something honey-sweet, the venom completely vanished. "I was just checking on your human. She's been rather unwell in the mornings."

Vael's red-gold eyes narrow to slits as he steps onto the porch. The boards creak beneath his weight. "I heard exactly what you were doing." His gaze slides from Domemri to me, lingering on my arms still wrapped protectively around my middle, then returns to the demon woman. "Pack your things."

"What?" Domemri's composure cracks, her delicate features contorting. "Surely you misunderstood?—"

"I understand perfectly." Vael moves closer, each step deliberate. "You've threatened the carrier of my child. You've overstepped your place in my household. You're dismissed."

Domemri's pale skin flushes an iridescent silver-blue, her eyes widening. "Vaelrix, please. I've served you faithfully for years. This human has bewitched you somehow?—"

"The only one attempting manipulation here is you." His voice remains level, but there's a dangerous edge to it that raises the hair on my arms. "I won't say it again. Pack your things and leave my property before nightfall."

"You can't mean this." Domemri's voice rises, her elegant composure crumbling completely. "After everything we've shared? You would choose this—this temporary vessel over me?" She gestures wildly at me, her pale violet eyes flashing.

Vael crosses his arms over his chest, his expression hardening to granite. "Trinity is

carrying my heir. That makes her more valuable than your wounded pride."

"Valuable?" Domemri laughs, the sound brittle and sharp. "You speak of her like she's an asset, but I see how you look at her. She's gotten under your skin somehow."

I hold my breath, unable to look away from Vael's face as his jaw tightens, the muscle there jumping beneath his ash-gray skin.

"My reasons are none of your concern," he says finally. "But threatening anyone under my protection is unforgivable. You know the values of our people better than that."

Domemri's shoulders slump, her elegant horns dipping forward as the fight seems to drain from her. "Protection," she repeats, almost to herself. Then her gaze lifts, hardening as it lands on me. "She'll leave you, you know. The moment she's fulfilled her obligation, she'll be gone. Then what will you have?"

"My heir," Vael answers simply. "Which was always the arrangement."

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Something flickers across his face—so quickly I almost miss it. Uncertainty? Regret? I can't be sure, but it's gone in an instant, replaced by that impassive mask he wears so well.

Domemri's lips press into a thin line. "Very well." She straightens, gathering her dignity around her like a cloak. "I'll collect my belongings."

She glides past Vael, giving him a wide berth, but pauses at the doorway to look back at me. "His interest is temporary, human. Remember that when you find yourself discarded." With that parting shot, she disappears into the house.

Vael watches her go, his broad shoulders still rigid with tension. When he finally turns to me, his expression is unreadable.

"Are you alright?" he asks, his voice rough.

I nod, suddenly aware of how vulnerable I must look, curled in this chair with my arms wrapped around myself. I force myself to straighten, to meet his gaze.

"I'm fine." My voice comes out steadier than I feel. "Thank you for... intervening."

His nostrils flare slightly as he studies me. "She won't trouble you again."

I stare up at him, this demon who has just defended me against one of his own. I don't understand him—his motives, his actions, sometimes even his words. But in this moment, I'm achingly grateful for his return.

VAEL

My blood boils beneath my skin even as I hear Domemri leave. Her scent lingers in the air—that metallic tang mixed with something I've always found too sweet, cloying. It suddenly repulses me in ways I can't articulate. The image of her looming over Trinity, threat heavy in her voice, replays in my mind. I'd heard enough from the moment I approached the house. More than enough.

The only thing that is keeping me in place is studying Trinity. I notice how small she looks in that chair, even as she straightens her spine and lifts her chin. Defiant, always defiant, even when scared. It's one of the things that first drew me to her—that stubborn pride that mirrors my own.

"How long has she been treating you like that?" I demand, the words coming out harsher than intended.

Trinity's green eyes widen slightly. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." I cross the distance between us in two strides, towering over her. "How long?"

She shrugs one shoulder, a casual dismissal that only fuels my anger. "Since you left. Before that she just kept her distance."

"And you didn't think to tell me when I returned?"

"Tell you what?" Trinity uncurls her legs and stands, refusing to be physically dominated despite the considerable height difference between us. "That your housekeeper doesn't like me? That she made some vague threats? I've handled

worse."

The casual way she says it—as though threats to her safety are an expected part of existence—makes something twist painfully in my chest.

"That's not the point." I rake a hand through my hair, dislodging more of it from the leather tie. "You're under my protection. That means you report threats, no matter how 'vague' you consider them."

Trinity laughs, the sound hollow and bitter. "Protection? Is that what you call this arrangement?" She gestures between us. "I'm here to breed for you, Vael. I'm not your ward or your responsibility beyond making sure I stay healthy enough to deliver your child."

Her words should sit perfectly fine with me. After all, she's only stating the terms we agreed upon. But somehow, hearing her reduce our arrangement to such clinical terms makes my jaw clench.

"While you carry my heir, your safety is absolutely my responsibility." I step closer, close enough to catch the scent of her—honey and something earthy, a human smell I've grown inexplicably addicted to. "But this goes beyond our arrangement. Domemri threatened someone under my roof. That reflects poorly on me and dishonors my household."

Trinity tilts her head, studying me with those perceptive green eyes. "Is that really what's bothering you? Your honor?"

"What else would it be?" I snap, but the question hits uncomfortably close to something I've been avoiding examining too closely.

"I don't know." She crosses her arms over her chest, a defensive posture that draws

my attention to the slight swell at her abdomen—barely noticeable to anyone who hasn't spent hours memorizing the contours of her body. "But you seemed... personally offended. Not just professionally."

I turn away, stalking to the edge of the porch where I can look out at my gardens rather than into her too-observant eyes. "I don't like being disobeyed. Domemri knows the rules of my household. She chose to ignore them."

"The rules being what? Be nice to the human breeder?"

The bitterness in her tone makes me turn back. "The rules being respect for anyone under this roof. She knew that. She chose to threaten you anyway."

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"It's fine, Vael. Really." Trinity sighs, suddenly looking tired. "I'm used to demons treating me like I'm nothing. It's not exactly a new experience."

Her words hit me like a physical blow. I cross the porch in two strides, crowding into her space. "Is that how you think I treat you? Like you're nothing?"

"No." She doesn't back away, meeting my gaze steadily. "But you're the exception, not the rule. And even with you, I'm still just a means to an end."

Something hot and dangerous unfurls in my chest. Before I can stop myself, I cup her face in my hands, tilting it up toward mine. "Is that what you think?" My voice drops to a growl. "That you're just a convenient womb to me?"

Her pulse jumps beneath my fingers, her pupils dilating. "Isn't that the arrangement? You've been very clear about the transactional nature of this... situation."

"The situation has evolved." The admission escapes before I can contain it, surprising us both.

"Evolved how?" Her voice wavers slightly.

I should step back. I should release her and reestablish the professional distance we've maintained outside the bedroom. Instead, I find myself stroking my thumb across her cheekbone, captivated by the softness of her skin.

"I don't know," I admit roughly. "But I do know I won't tolerate anyone threatening you. Not Domemri, not anyone. And not because of our arrangement or my honor,

but because the thought of you being afraid or in danger..." I trail off, struggling to articulate the unfamiliar protective rage surging through me.

"Because what?" she whispers, her breath warm against my wrist.

"Because it enrages me in ways I don't fully understand." I hold her gaze, letting her see the truth of it in my eyes. "Tell me if anyone treats you with disrespect again. I don't care who it is. You deserve better than that."

Trinity's eyes widen at my confession, a flicker of something—fear? uncertainty?—crossing her face. She steps back, breaking contact with my hands, and a cold feeling settles in my gut. I've pushed too far, revealed too much of whatever this strange, possessive feeling is that's been growing since I first saw her.

I already knew that she was tentative around demons. I knew she didn't want someone else to use her, claim her. But here I am, crossing lines I set.

"I should..." Trinity wraps her arms around herself, suddenly looking small despite her defiant posture. "I need some water."

I nod, giving her space. "Of course."

She takes three steps toward the kitchen before stopping abruptly. Her face drains of color so quickly it's alarming, and I'm at her side before I can think better of it.

"Trinity?"

"I don't feel—" She claps a hand over her mouth, her whole body tensing.

I recognize the signs instantly, sweeping her into my arms and rushing her to the bathing chamber just as she begins to heave. I set her down gently before the waste

basin, gathering her long brown hair in my fist to keep it from her face as her body convulses.

"Let it out," I murmur, keeping my voice low and steady. "I've got you."

She retches painfully, her small frame shaking with the force of it. I hold her hair with one hand, my other moving in awkward circles on her back. I've never comforted someone like this before, and the unfamiliarity of it makes me feel strangely vulnerable.

When the heaving finally subsides, Trinity slumps against the basin, trembling and pale.

"Stay here," I tell her, as if she could go anywhere in this state. "I'll get a cloth."

I wet a soft cloth with cool water and return, kneeling beside her to wipe her face. Her skin is clammy beneath my touch, and there's a fragility to her I've never seen before—not even in the dungeons.

"Sorry," she whispers, voice raw. "This is... embarrassing."

"It's pregnancy," I correct her, continuing to dab at her forehead. "Nothing to apologize for."

Trinity's lips twitch in a weak attempt at a smile. "Still not the most dignified way to end an argument."

"We weren't arguing." I help her to her feet, steadying her when she sways. "We were having a discussion."

"Is that what demons call it when they loom over someone and make intense

declarations?" There's a hint of her usual spark in the question, despite her pallor.

I guide her to sit on the edge of the bathing pool. "Stay. I'm going to make you some tea."

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She doesn't protest, which tells me just how terrible she must be feeling. I'm back in minutes with a steaming cup of mild herbal tea—nothing too strong or sweet that might upset her stomach further.

"Small sips," I instruct, pressing the cup into her hands.

Trinity obeys, her throat working as she swallows carefully. I find myself watching the motion, cataloging every detail of her—the way her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks, the slight furrow between her brows as she concentrates.

"You don't have to stay," she murmurs after a few minutes of silence. "I'm fine now."

"Clearly."

She shoots me a look, but there's no heat behind it. "I've been taking care of myself for a long time, Vael."

"And now you don't have to." The words come out with more intensity than I intended, and I see her tense slightly. I moderate my tone. "Just... let someone help you, Trinity. It doesn't make you weak."

She studies me over the rim of her cup, those green eyes seeing too much. "Why do you care?"

It's a fair question. One I've been asking myself since the moment I saw her across Asmodeus's gathering and found myself unable to look away. I still don't have a good answer.

"Finish your tea," I say instead. "Then you should rest."

I wait while she finishes, then escort her to her room, hovering closer than necessary as if she might collapse at any moment. She doesn't protest when I pull back the covers for her, though she does raise an eyebrow when I sit in the chair beside her bed.

"You're going to watch me sleep?"

"I'm going to make sure you don't get sick again," I correct her, settling into the chair. "Just until you fall asleep."

Trinity looks like she wants to argue, but exhaustion wins out. She burrows into the blankets, her expression softening as fatigue overcomes her wariness.

"This isn't part of our arrangement," she mumbles, already half-asleep.

"Consider it an amendment."

She doesn't respond, her breathing gradually evening out as sleep claims her. I remain in the chair, watching the rise and fall of her chest, listening to each breath. My gaze traces the curve of her cheek, the way her hair spills across the pillow like dark water.

This is dangerous territory. I didn't anticipate this pull toward her—this need to be near her that goes beyond physical desire. I want her safe. I want her well. I want to wake up to her scent and her sharp tongue and those eyes that see through every defense I've built.

I want more than our arrangement allows.

The realization settles over me like a weight, uncomfortable but undeniable. My

mother would call it weakness. My peers would mock me for being enchanted by a human. But sitting here in the dim light, watching Trinity sleep, I can't bring myself to care about any of that.

I'm in too deep, and I don't want to find my way back.

13

TRINITY

I jolt awake to unfamiliar sounds coming from the kitchen. Metal against metal, cupboards opening and closing, a soft humming that definitely doesn't belong to Vael. The morning light filters through the curtains, and for a moment, I'm disoriented. My head feels stuffed with cotton, aftermath of last night's sickness.

The memory of Vael holding my hair, his large hand awkwardly patting my back, surfaces. Had he actually stayed until I fell asleep? The chair beside my bed stands empty now, but I swear I can still feel the imprint of his presence.

Another clatter from the kitchen snaps me back to the present. Someone's in the house.

I slide out of bed, ignoring the slight wooziness that accompanies the movement. No way am I facing a potential threat in my nightclothes. I pull on a simple dress, run fingers through my tangled hair, and move silently toward the doorway.

The sounds grow louder as I creep down the hall. I pause at the kitchen entrance, muscles tensed for flight, and peek around the corner.

A woman stands at the counter, her back to me. Human, not demon—that much is immediately clear from her stature and the sun-kissed skin of her exposed arms.

Platinum blonde hair with shaved sides and a long braid swinging as she works. She's humming some unfamiliar tune while arranging plants and herbs I don't recognize.

My heart sinks. Did Vael find another girl? Has he already tired of me and my sickness, my sharp tongue? The thought shouldn't hurt—this arrangement was never meant to be exclusive beyond the breeding part—but something twists painfully in my chest.

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I must make some sound, because she turns, ice-blue eyes landing on me. Instead of surprise or guilt, her face breaks into a wide, genuine smile.

"There you are! I was wondering when you'd wake up." She wipes her hands on a cloth tucked into her waistband. "You look like shit, no offense."

I blink, taken aback by her bluntness. "I... what?"

"Sorry, that's just my way." She gestures to the kitchen table. "Sit before you fall over. You're greener than dreelk leaves."

I remain frozen in the doorway. "Who are you?"

"Oh! Right." She laughs, the sound bright and uncomplicated. "I'm Jackie. Your new cook and cleaner, courtesy of your brooding demon." She extends a hand. "And apparently your pregnancy assistant, from what I hear."

I don't take her hand, processing her words. "Vael hired you?"

"Sure did. Showed up at my door at dawn, looking all serious and important." She drops her hand without offense. "Said he needed someone who understood human pregnancies and wouldn't try to poison you." She winks. "I've got excellent references on both counts."

Relief floods through me, followed immediately by confusion. Why would Vael go to such trouble?

"You look like you could use this." Jackie turns back to the counter, pouring steaming liquid into a mug. The scent reaches me—ginger and something else, mild but aromatic. "Special blend for pregnancy nausea. Helped three women through their first trimesters with this stuff."

I approach cautiously, accepting the mug. "Thank you." I take a small sip, surprised by the pleasant, gentle flavor. "It's good."

"Course it is. I don't make shit things." She resumes chopping herbs. "Your demon mentioned you had a rough night. Morning sickness hitting early, huh?"

"My demon," I mutter, settling into a chair. "He's not my anything."

Jackie shoots me a knowing look but doesn't comment. "First pregnancy's always the worst. Your body's like, 'what the fuck is happening' and just rebels against everything."

Despite myself, I smile. There's something refreshing about her directness.

"So, Vael hired you just for... cooking and cleaning?" I try to keep my tone casual.

"And to keep an eye on you when he's away hunting." She shrugs. "He was very specific about making sure you eat properly and don't strain yourself."

A strange warmth spreads through my chest. I quickly tamp it down. This is practical, not personal. Vael is protecting his investment.

"I don't need a babysitter," I say, even as I take another sip of the surprisingly effective tea.

"Good, because I'm not one." Jackie tosses ingredients into a bowl with practiced

efficiency. "I'm just here to make sure you don't keel over from eating the wrong things or cleaning toomuch. Pregnant humans have different needs than demons, and that man clearly has no idea what to do with you."

The way she says it—matter-of-fact and without judgment—makes me relax slightly. But a new feeling surfaces, a prickle of something uncomfortable as I watch her move confidently through Vael's kitchen.

Envy.

How easily she occupies this space, how naturally she speaks of Vael. How many others has she helped? How many other women has Vael brought into his home?

The questions swirl in my mind, irrational but persistent. I grip my mug tighter.

"Been working for demon households long?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Most of my life." Jackie cracks something that looks like an egg but with a blue shell into the bowl. "Good money, if you can handle the attitudes. Better than the alternatives for humans here."

I open my mouth to ask more when heavy footsteps approach from the hallway. My pulse quickens before I can control it.

Vael appears in the doorway, his imposing frame filling the space. His red-gold eyes sweep the kitchen before landing on me. Something in his expression shifts.

"You're awake." His deep voice disturbs the air between us. "How are you feeling?"

Jackie glances between us with barely concealed interest. I swallow, suddenly aware of how I must look—hair unbrushed, face likely still pale from sickness, caught off

guard in his kitchen with another woman.

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"I'm fine," I manage, lifting my chin. "I see you've been busy."

Vael's gaze sharpens as he approaches me, those red-gold eyes studying my face with unsettling intensity. He moves with the fluid grace of a predator, even in the domesticity of his own kitchen, dark hair tousled as if he's been running his fingers through it.

"Are you still feeling nauseous?" His voice drops lower, almost private despite Jackie's presence just feet away.

I nod, clutching the mug between my palms. "A little. The tea helps."

My eyes dart to Jackie, who's busying herself with breakfast preparations but clearly listening to every word. The ease with which she moves through Vael's space still bothers me in ways I can't rationalize. She belongs here more than I do, clearly.

Vael follows my gaze, something flickering across his features. "Jackie," he says without looking away from me, "would you give us a moment?"

"Sure thing, boss." She wipes her hands again, amusement playing at her lips. "I'll go check the pantry supplies anyway. You're running low on zynthra, and the pregnant lady needs her vegetables."

As Jackie disappears into the adjoining pantry, Vael takes a step closer. A smirk slowly spreads across his face, transforming his severe features into something unfairly handsome.

"You know," he says, voice pitched low enough that only I can hear, "Jackie has a wife."

I blink, processing his words. "What?"

"A wife. Her name is Donna. Half-nymph, completely devoted to Jackie." His smirk deepens as understanding dawns on my face. "But I needed someone to take care of the house, and I thought it might be easier for you to have another human woman around. One who doesn't pose any... complications."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I stare into my mug, mortified that he's read my jealousy so easily.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mutter.

Vael leans down, one hand braced on the table beside me. I catch his scent—something like smoke and spices, uniquely him. "Don't you?"

I force myself to meet his gaze, determined not to let him see how flustered I feel. "Why would I care who works for you?"

"I didn't say you cared." His voice drops another octave. "But the look on your face when I walked in... very interesting."

"I was surprised to find a stranger in the kitchen," I counter, lifting my chin. "Nothing more."

"Of course." His mouth quirks up at one corner. "My mistake."

The amusement in his eyes makes something flip in my stomach that has nothing to do with morning sickness. I hate how easily he sees through me, especially when I've

spent years perfecting the art of concealing my true feelings.

"Well," I say, struggling to regain my composure, "thank you for thinking about my comfort. It was... considerate."

"I can be considerate when it serves a purpose." He straightens, still looking too pleased with himself. "A human who understands your needs seemed practical."

Practical. Of course. Everything about this arrangement is practical for him. I shouldn't feel touched that he went out at dawn to find someone to help me through this pregnancy. I shouldn't care that he chose a woman with a wife to spare my nonexistent feelings. I shouldn't feel anything beyond the physical when we're together.

But I do, and that terrifies me more than any demon ever could.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I ask, unable to keep the accusation from my voice. "Making me uncomfortable."

"Immensely." He doesn't even try to deny it. "I've never seen you flustered before. It's... refreshing."

I roll my eyes, but something warm unfurls in my chest. This banter feels dangerous, too close to something real.

"I wasn't jealous," I insist, one last feeble attempt.

Vael just raises an eyebrow, silent challenge in his expression. Then he turns toward the pantry. "Jackie, you can come back now. Stop pretending you're counting spice jars."

Jackie emerges with a sheepish grin. "Not my fault you two are more entertaining than inventory."

I groan, burying my face in my hands as Vael chuckles, a deep rumble that I feel more than hear.

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This is just sex, I remind myself. Just a transaction. These feelings—this warmth, this jealousy, this delight in our exchanges—they're nothing but hormones and proximity.

So why does it feel like so much more?

14

TRINITY

A week passes in a blur of nausea, unexpected naps, and Jackie's endless cups of special tea. I've established a routine of sorts—wake up, rush to the bathroom, sip tea while Jackie chatters about everything and nothing, rest when my body demands it, which is embarrassingly often.

But today, the routine breaks because Vael is back.

I hear him before I see him—heavy footsteps on the stone path outside, followed by the door swinging open. My body reacts before my mind can caution against it, heart speeding up, senses sharpening. It's been a week without his looming presence, his intense gaze, his sardonic remarks.

Not that I've missed him.

"You look like shit," Jackie announces from the kitchen doorway, her customary greeting apparently extended to everyone.

"Charming as ever, Jackie." Vael's deep voice reaches me where I'm curled on the

couch in the sitting room, a blanket around my shoulders despite the mild temperature.

I stay perfectly still, listening to their exchange.

"Successful hunt?" Jackie asks.

"Yes."

"Anyone die?"

"Only who needed to."

"Cool. Dinner's in an hour."

Their easy rapport prickles at me. Even knowing Jackie is happily committed elsewhere doesn't stop the irrational possessiveness that flares in my chest. Another emotion I have no business feeling.

Heavy footsteps approach the sitting room. I quickly grab the book beside me, pretending to be absorbed in its contents when Vael appears in the doorway. His massive frame blocks the light, casting me in shadow.

I look up with carefully practiced indifference. "You're back."

His red-gold eyes move over me slowly, taking in the blanket, the book clutched too tightly in my hands, the cup of tea on the side table. "You're pale."

"That's my natural complexion," I counter, setting the book aside. "Not all of us can achieve that attractive ash-gray tone."

His mouth quirks up at one corner as he moves into the room. I catch sight of a new cut along his jawline, already healing but still visible. Without thinking, I ask, "Did your bounty fight back?"

Vael's fingers drift to the mark. "This? No. He was too busy begging." He sits in the chair opposite me, his large body making the furniture seem delicate by comparison. "This was from stopping in Ezzid on the way back."

That city is at the far north of the continent. "Stopping for what?"

He doesn't answer, reaching instead into a pocket and pulling out a small pouch. He tosses it onto the low table between us.

I look at it suspiciously. "What's that?"

"Open it and find out."

With hesitant fingers, I undo the drawstring and tip the contents into my palm. A bracelet slides out—delicate silver links interspersed with small blue stones that catch the light.

"It's a protective charm," Vael says, watching my reaction closely. "The stones are from Ikoth. They're known to ease pregnancy symptoms. At least, that's what the merchant claimed."

I stare at the bracelet, then at him. "You... bought me jewelry?"

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"I bought you a functional item that happens to be decorative." He leans back, defensive. "Jackie mentioned your symptoms were getting worse."

The bracelet feels cool against my skin. I'm not used to gifts without strings attached—especially not from men. "Thank you," I say cautiously, still waiting for the catch.

He shrugs, looking almost uncomfortable with my gratitude. "It was on my way."

"Ezzid was on your way?" I raise an eyebrow, slipping the bracelet onto my wrist. "Isn't that in an entirely different direction?"

"Are you always this ungrateful?" But there's no real heat in his words.

"Only when demons bring me mysterious magical items." I admire the way the stones catch the light. "It's... beautiful."

Something shifts in his expression, softening the hard edges of his face. "Good."

The moment stretches between us, teetering on the edge of something dangerous. I look away first, suddenly overwhelmed by the scent of him—smoke and spice and something metallic that must be blood. My stomach rolls.

"You need to bathe," I blurt out, pressing a hand to my mouth. "Now."

Vael frowns. "I just got home?—"

"Now," I repeat with more urgency, swallowing hard. "Or I'm going to throw up on your boots."

Understanding dawns on his face. He rises immediately, stepping back. "The scent?"

I nod, breathing through my mouth. "Everything is... stronger." I gesture vaguely. "Sensitive."

His eyes narrow thoughtfully. "I've heard this might happen. Your senses heightening is a good sign—it means the pregnancy is progressing normally."

"Wonderful." I close my eyes, still fighting nausea. "I'm thrilled to have a supernatural reaction to your stench."

Vael huffs what might be a laugh. "I'll bathe."

"And burn those clothes," I add, only half-joking.

He moves toward the door but pauses, looking back at me. "Are you... is it always this bad?"

The genuine concern in his voice catches me off guard. I open my eyes to find his expression serious, brows drawn together.

"No," I admit. "Just mornings, usually. And when certain smells hit me." I gesture at him. "Like eau de bounty hunter."

Vael laughs, a deep rumble that surprises me with its genuine mirth. "Fair enough." He runs a hand through his dark hair. "I'll be back, smelling considerably less offensive."

After he disappears down the hallway, I examine the bracelet more closely. The blue stones catch the crimson light filtering through the windows, creating tiny purple flashes that dance across my skin. I slip it onto my wrist and feel a subtle warmth spread up my arm—not unpleasant, just noticeably there.

By the time Vael returns, I've composed myself enough to sit upright without the blanket. The scent of him has changed—clean, with hints of some herb I can't name, but distinctly him underneath it all. His hair is still damp, pushed back from his face, highlighting the sharp angles of his features.

"Better?" He spreads his arms, inviting inspection.

I take an exaggerated sniff. "Marginally."

He drops into the seat across from me, freshly dressed in a simple black tunic and pants. The informal clothing somehow makes him look more dangerous than his usual armor—like a predator at rest.

"I spoke with Mireva while I was out," he says, his tone shifting to something more purposeful.

"The healer?" He's mentioned her, though I've yet to meet her.

He nods. "She's agreed to see us tomorrow. To confirm the pregnancy."

My hand instinctively touches my still-flat stomach. "Is that necessary? I haven't bled, and unless you've been slipping anti-nausea herbs into my food for fun..."

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"I want to be certain." His eyes follow the movement of my hand. "And to check that everything is... proceeding normally."

"You mean you want to make sure your heir is developing on schedule," I correct him, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

Vael's jaw tightens. "I mean I want to make sure you're healthy."

The sincerity in his voice makes me look away. I'm not used to being someone's priority—especially not a demon's. "Fine. Tomorrow, then."

The healer's home sits nestled in a grove of strange, silver-barked trees whose leaves rustle like whispers even when the air is still. The structure itself seems grown rather than built, with organic curves and surfaces that shimmer faintly with what must be protective magic.

"You're nervously quiet," Vael observes as we approach the entrance.

"Just wondering what demonic prenatal care involves. Blood sacrifices? Ritual chanting? Making me drink something that turns my insides to fire?"

He snorts. "Mireva isn't a demon."

"What is she then?"

"You'll see."

Before I can press for more information, the door swings open without anyone touching it. A tall, willowy figure stands in the threshold, her skin a deep bronze with faint lines that glow beneath the surface like buried embers. Her eyes—sea-glass green and unnervingly clear—assess us both in one sweep.

"Vaelrix," she greets him with a nod before turning to me. "And you must be Trinity."

I resist the urge to step behind Vael. "That's me."

"Come in. The trees don't like it when I leave the door open too long."

She turns without waiting for a response, her long coils of deep green-black hair swaying with her movement. Vael places his hand at the small of my back, a steady pressure that propels me forward when my feet might otherwise have hesitated.

The interior of Mireva's home is filled with plants I've never seen before—some growing from the walls themselves, others suspended in glass containers that hang from the ceiling. The air smells alive, green and sweet and ancient.

"Sit," she gestures to a curved bench that looks like it grew straight from the floor. "Both of you."

I perch on the edge, hyperaware of Vael's solid presence beside me. Mireva stands before us, her hands clasped at her waist.

"You're with child," she states simply. Not a question.

"We think so," I answer. "But we wanted confirmation."

Mireva's expression remains serene. "You don't need me to confirm what you already

know, Trinity."

Her directness catches me off-guard. "I?—"

"But I understand the desire for certainty." She kneels before me, those luminous eyes seeking permission. "May I?"

I nod, and she places her hands gently on my abdomen. Her touch feels like sunlight through leaves, warm and dappled. Something inside me responds to it—a flutter too subtle to be physical movement but too distinct to be imagination.

Mireva smiles, the expression transforming her serious face. "Two heartbeats," she says softly. "Strong and clear."

Vael tenses beside me. "Two?"

"Twins," Mireva confirms, removing her hands.

The word echoes in my head. Twins. Not one baby but two. The transaction suddenly doubled in complexity, in responsibility.

"You're certain?" Vael's voice sounds strained.

"As certain as the tides, bounty hunter." Mireva rises to her feet in one fluid motion. "Your bloodline splits into two branches."

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As we leave Mireva's home, the reality of her words settles over me like a weighted cloak. Twins. I'm carrying twins. Vael walks beside me, his expression unreadable, lost in his own thoughts about this unexpected development.

I press my palm against my stomach, trying to reconcile the emptiness I feel with the knowledge that two lives are growing inside me. Relief mingles with terror—relief that this arrangement wasn't some elaborate hoax, that my body is doing what it's meant to do; terror at the heightened stakes, the doubled responsibility.

The strangest feeling, though, is the quiet warmth blooming beneath my ribs. For the first time in years, I belong somewhere. These children—his children—have created a place for me in this alien world, temporary as it may be.

15

VAEL

The walk back from Mireva's is silent, heavy with unspoken thoughts. Trinity's face remains carefully composed, but her fingers keep drifting to her stomach, an unconscious gesture that draws my gaze each time.

Twins. My mother will be ecstatic—two heirs instead of one, doubling our chances of continuing the bloodline with strength.

I should feel triumphant. Instead, my chest feels tight, constricted by something I can't name.

By the time we reach home, the red sun hangs low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the stone path. I unlock the door, holding it open for Trinity. She slips past me, her scent—honey and warmth with that new undercurrent that must be the pregnancy—brushing my senses.

"Jackie?" Trinity calls, but the house remains silent.

"She mentioned visiting her wife today," I remind her, watching as she sets her cloak aside. "She left food prepared in the kitchen."

Trinity nods, but makes no move toward the kitchen. Instead, she stands in the center of the living space, looking strangely lost. Her fingers twist together, then separate, then find their way back to her still-flat belly.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, desperate to break the silence.

"No." She meets my eyes briefly before looking away. "You?"

"No."

More silence. I move to the stone hearth, igniting the fire with a gesture. The flames leap up instantly, bathing the room in amber light that softens the edges of everything, including Trinity's tense features.

"Twins," I say finally, the word hanging in the air between us.

"Twins," she echoes, a small, incredulous laugh escaping her. "Double trouble."

"Double success," I correct her automatically, but the words feel hollow.

Trinity sinks onto the couch, tucking her legs beneath her. The firelight plays across

her face, highlighting the faint circles beneath her eyes, the slight pallor of her skin. She looks exhausted, vulnerable in a way that twists something in my gut.

"Are you disappointed?" she asks suddenly.

The question catches me off guard. "Disappointed? Why would I be disappointed?"

"It's not what we agreed to. One baby, not two. It... complicates things." Her eyes, when they meet mine, are searching.

I cross to the cabinet where I keep the stronger drinks, pouring myself a measure of Amerinth. The purple liquid catches the firelight, shimmering. "It doesn't change our agreement," I tell her, keeping my voice steady. "Two, one... the terms remain the same."

What I don't say is how the image of her with two infants—mychildren—keeps flashing through my mind. How the thought of her leaving once they're born suddenly feels like a wound I can't cauterize.

"Good," she says, but her voice lacks conviction.

I take a long swallow of the Amerinth, welcoming the burn. "Are you concerned about the delivery?"

She shrugs one shoulder. "I'm concerned about everything. One baby was terrifying enough. Two feels... impossible."

Without thinking, I move to sit beside her on the couch. "Nothing about this is impossible. I'll ensure you have everything you need. The best care, the finest healers."

"It's not just that." She stares into the fire. "I never wanted to be a mother. I told you that. And now I'm going to birth not one but two children that I'll have to walk away from."

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The words hit me like a physical blow. "You won't have to walk away. You get to walk away. That was the deal." My voice comes out harsher than intended.

Trinity's eyes snap to mine, narrowing. "Are you changing the terms, bounty hunter?"

"No. I just—" I run a hand through my hair, frustrated by my inability to express what's churning inside me. "I'm simply saying that the option remains open. Stay or go. Your choice."

She stares at me, confusion clear in her expression. "Why would I stay?"

Why indeed? I have no answer that makes sense, even to myself. No answer I'm willing to voice.

"The children will need feeding," I say instead. "You could... remain until they're weaned."

Trinity's laugh is sharp. "Right. Because I'm just a handy milk source."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean, Vael?" Her voice softens unexpectedly. "What are you really asking?"

I drain the rest of my drink, welcoming the burn down my throat. "Nothing. It was merely a practical suggestion."

But practicality has nothing to do with the knot in my chest, the way my mind keeps conjuring images of Trinity singing to our children, of her smile first thing in the morning, of her presence becoming a permanent fixture in these rooms that have always felt too empty.

"I need to check on something," I mutter, standing abruptly. "You should eat something. For the... for them."

I retreat to my study before she can respond, shutting the door behind me. Leaning against it, I close my eyes and exhale slowly. What is wrong with me? This arrangement is perfect—exactly what I wanted. An heir—now two—without the complication of a permanent mate. No emotional entanglements. No vulnerability.

Yet here I am, shaken to my core by the healer's revelation. Not because it complicates our deal, but because it makes Trinity's eventual departure seem even more... wrong.

I don't want her to leave. The realization hits with the force of a physical blow.

When did this human woman—with her sharp tongue and stubborn spirit—become someone I can't imagine my life without?

16

TRINITY

Two months in, and my body has transformed into unfamiliar territory. The constant nausea has finally begun to retreat like an unwelcome houseguest who's overstayed their welcome, though occasional waves still hit without warning. My breasts have grown tender, full—changes that remind me with every movement that I'm no longer just myself.

Yet despite these physical transformations, something else has shifted in Vael's home—something I didn't anticipate.

Vael hasn't touched me in weeks.

The realization has been bothering me more and more. Like right now, as I stand at the bedroom window, watching the strange metallic flowers in the garden catch Aerasak's crimson light. The garden has become my morning ritual, a quiet moment before Jackie arrives with breakfast and cheerful chatter. I trace a finger across the glass, following the silhouette of a particularly striking bloom.

When we'd made our bargain, I'd assumed the physical aspect would continue throughout the pregnancy. After all, isn't that what men want? Especially demon men with their legendary appetites? Yet since that day at Mireva's, since learning about the twins, Vael has maintained a careful, frustrating distance.

He's attentive in every other way—ensuring I eat properly, checking that I'm comfortable, bringing books he thinks might interest me. But the heated glances, the casual touches that sent electricity through my skin—those have vanished.

"This isn't supposed to bother me," I mutter to my reflection in the window glass. My words fog the pane momentarily, obscuring my image.

I turn away, pacing the length of my bedroom. The plush carpet absorbs my footsteps, another luxury I never expected to enjoy. Every comfort provided, every need anticipated—except the one I hadn't realized I'd developed.

My body craves him.

The admission, even just to myself, makes me halt mid-step. This was never part of our arrangement. I was supposed to be practical, detached. Sex was

transactional—necessary for conception, pleasurable enough to make the process bearable. I never expected to miss his touch, to lie awake remembering the weight of his body against mine.

"It's just hormones," I tell the empty room, resuming my pacing. "Pregnancy does things to a woman's body. That's all this is."

But the explanation feels hollow, insufficient to explain the way my heart races when he enters a room, or how I find excuses to brush against him when we pass in the hallway.

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A knock at my door interrupts my thoughts.

"Come in," I call, quickly composing my expression.

Vael steps in, tall frame filling the doorway. His red-gold eyes scan the room before settling on my face, and my traitorous pulse quickens.

"Jackie sent me to tell you breakfast is ready," he says, maintaining his position by the door, as if afraid to enter my space. "She made those pastries you liked yesterday."

I nod, forcing a smile. "Thank you. I'll be down in a moment."

He lingers, one hand still on the doorframe. "Are you feeling well this morning? No sickness?"

"Better today," I admit. "I think we're past the worst of it." My hand unconsciously drifts to my stomach, still flat beneath my nightdress. "They're being kinder to me lately."

Something flickers in his expression at the word "they." Pride, perhaps, or something deeper I can't name.

"Good." He shifts his weight, a rare display of uncertainty from the usually confident demon. "If you need anything..."

"I'll let you know," I finish for him.

When he leaves, I sink onto the edge of the bed, exasperated with myself. This wasn't supposed to happen. Sex with Vael was meant to be a means to an end—a way to secure my freedom while giving him what he wanted. I wasn't supposed to want him, to catalog the details of his expressions, to miss the feel of his hands on my skin.

I slip out of my nightdress, selecting a simple green gown from the wardrobe. As I dress, I catch sight of my reflection in the full-length mirror. My body hasn't changed much externally, but I know what's happening inside—two new lives taking shape, shifting my future in ways I never imagined.

"Get it together," I whisper to my reflection, twisting my hair into a simple knot at the nape of my neck. "This is physical. Just physical."

But as I make my way downstairs, drawn by the scent of fresh pastries and the prospect of seeing Vael across the breakfast table, I know I'm lying to myself. And that realization terrifies me more than any demon ever could.

I manage to make it through breakfast, even with Vael's eyes all over me. Even as I'm dying for him. I bite my tongue when he leaves and goes down the hall to his study.

I've been fidgety all morning, unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time. Jackie notices, of course, but mercifully doesn't comment beyond a knowing smirk when I knock over a vase while pacing the sitting room.

"Maybe some fresh air would do you good," she suggests, righting the vase with practiced efficiency.

"Maybe," I agree, though I know fresh air isn't what I need.

By midday, I'm practically crawling out of my skin. The restless energy has only built, a persistent thrumming beneath my skin that makes it impossible to sit still. I

find myself wandering the house, trailing my fingers along the cold stone walls, seeking something I can't name—or rather, something I refuse to name.

When I pass the kitchen and see Jackie preparing a tray with lunch, an idea forms.

"Is that for Vael?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

Jackie nods, adding a small black pitcher to the tray. "He's been holed up in his study all morning. Said he had correspondence to catch up on."

"I could take it to him," I offer, too quickly. "You've been on your feet all day."

Her ice-blue eyes flick up to me, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Have I? Hadn't noticed." She steps back from the tray with a flourish. "But if you're offering..."

I lift the tray before she can change her mind, ignoring her knowing expression. The walk to Vael's study feels both too long and too short, my heart picking up speed with every step. I pause outside his door, balancing the tray on one hip to knock.

"Enter," comes his deep voice from within.

I push the door open with my shoulder, stepping into the warmth of his study. The room smells of him—that distinctive blend of smoke and spice that clings to his skin. Vael sits behind his massive desk, quill in hand, surrounded by stacks of parchment. He looks up, surprise flickering across his face when he sees me.

"Lunch," I announce unnecessarily, moving toward him.

"I didn't expect you to be the one delivering it," he says, setting down his quill.

I place the tray on his desk, careful not to disturb his papers. "Jackie was busy," I lie, knowing full well he can probably hear the quickening of my pulse.

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Instead of stepping back, I linger, running my fingers along the edge of his desk. "You've been working all morning."

"There's always work to be done." His red-gold eyes follow the movement of my fingers, narrowing slightly. "Is there something else you need, Trinity?"

The way he says my name—low, almost cautious—makes heat pool in my belly. Two months of restraint snap inside me like an overstretched cord.

"Yes," I admit, moving around the desk toward him. "There is."

I bend over his desk, ostensibly to arrange the items on his lunch tray, but my movements are deliberate, calculated. I can feel his gaze on me, feel the tension radiating from his body. When I glance up through my lashes, the hunger in his expression makes me bold.

"You've been avoiding me," I say softly, leaning closer. "Why?"

Vael's jaw tightens. "I haven't been avoiding you."

"No?" I shift a plate, deliberately brushing my breast against his arm. "You haven't touched me since we found out about the twins."

A muscle in his cheek twitches. "I didn't think?—"

"That's the problem," I interrupt, straightening to look him fully in the face. "You're thinking too much."

His hands move suddenly, gliding up my sides with a possessiveness that makes me gasp. "And what would you have me do instead?"

I don't answer with words. Instead, I lean into his touch, my body speaking the truth I've been denying.

Vael rises slightly from his chair, his hands pushing my skirt up inch by inch. "Is this what you've been wanting, little human? My hands on you again?"

"Yes," I breathe, already embarrassingly wet from just his touch.

He chuckles, the sound dark and knowing. His fingers find the damp heat between my thighs, and he groans. "Fuck, you're soaked." He slides two fingers inside me without preamble, making me cry out. "Have you been needing me, Trinity? Walking around my house, carrying my children, aching for me to fill you up again?"

I groan, too far gone for shame. "Yes. Gods, yes."

His thumb circles my clit as his fingers pump inside me, precise and merciless. "Tell me what you need."

"You," I gasp, hips rocking against his hand. "Inside me. Now."

Vael withdraws his hand, earning a frustrated whimper from me. He leans back in his chair, unlacing his pants with deliberate slowness. His cock springs free, thick and flushed, already leaking at the tip.

"Then take what you need," he commands, his voice rough with desire. "Use me, Trinity. Show me how badly you've wanted this."

I slide my skirts up, climbing onto Vael's lap, my thighs spread wide across his

powerful frame. His massive hands grip my hips, guiding me as I position myself over him. The head of his cock nudges against my entrance, thick and promising.

"You've been driving me crazy," I admit, voice husky with need as I lower myself slowly onto him. "You used to spend every night in my bed, and I have been aching for you."

His eyes lock with mine, pupils expanding until the red-gold is just a thin ring. "I thought you needed space," he growls. "Thought you wouldn't want me pawing at you while carrying the twins."

I sink down another inch, gasping as he stretches me. "Well, you thought wrong."

With one swift movement, I drop fully onto his length, impaling myself completely. We both cry out—me from the exquisite fullness, him from the tight heat now enveloping him.

"Fuck," Vael hisses, his fingers digging into the flesh of my hips hard enough to bruise. "You feel even better than before."

I rock experimentally, adjusting to his size. My body remembers him, welcomes him, clenches around him like he belongs there. I begin moving in earnest, lifting up until just the tip remains inside before sliding back down. Each descent sends jolts of pleasure radiating through my body.

"That's it," Vael encourages, his breath hot against my neck. "Take what you need from me."

I ride him harder, faster, my hands braced against his broad shoulders for leverage. The friction is delicious, but something's missing—some edge I can't quite reach in this position.

"Vael," I whimper, grinding down desperately. "I need—I need?—"

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"What do you need, little human?" His voice is strained, teetering on the edge of control. "Tell me."

"More," I plead, nails digging into his shoulders through his shirt. "I need more. Deeper. Harder."

Something feral flashes in his eyes. In one fluid motion, he stands, lifting me with him as if I weigh nothing. I cling to him, his cock still buried inside me, as he turns and bends me over his desk. Papers scatter, the inkwell tips—neither of us cares.

He withdraws almost completely before slamming back into me with a force that knocks the breath from my lungs. One hand wraps in my hair, the other grips my hip with bruising intensity.

"This what you need?" he snarls, setting a punishing rhythm that has my breasts bouncing with each thrust. "To be fucked like the greedy little thing you are?"

"Yes!" I cry out, beyond shame, beyond pretense. "Don't stop—please don't stop?"

Vael leans over me, his powerful chest pressed against my back, his mouth at my ear. "Look at you, so desperate for my cock. Did you think I didn't notice how you've been looking at me? How your nipples harden when I walk into a room?"

Each word is punctuated with a brutal thrust that hits something perfect inside me. I'm reduced to wordless sounds, moans and gasps that seem torn from my throat.

"Answer me," he demands, tugging my hair.

"I couldn't help it," I confess, trembling on the precipice of release. "I need you—need this?—"

His free hand snakes around to rub circles on my clit, tight and precise. "I'm going to fill you up again, Trinity. Fuck you so good you won't walk straight for days."

The dual stimulation—his cock hammering into me from behind, his fingers working my clit—pushes me over the edge. My orgasm crashes through me with unexpected force, my inner walls clamping down on him as waves of pleasure radiate outward.

"Fuck, fuck, FUCK," Vael growls, his rhythm faltering as my body milks him. With a final, powerful thrust, he buries himself deep and erupts, his cock pulsing inside me as he finds his own release.

Before he's even finished, he pulls out. I whimper at the sudden emptiness, but then feel his fingers gathering his release where it drips from me, pushing it back inside with two thick digits.

"You look so fucking good," he growls, voice rough with satisfaction. "Bent over my desk, carrying my children, leaking my cum."

His possessive words send an unexpected aftershock of pleasure through me. I turn my head, catching a glimpse of his face—flushed with exertion, eyes blazing with something that looks dangerously close to adoration.

"Perfect," he murmurs, gentler now, as he continues to stroke me from behind. "So fucking perfect."

And in this moment...it feels like it is.

VAEL

Idon't sleep much that night. Trinity's warm body curls against mine, her soft breathing a steady rhythm that should lull me to rest. After spending the afternoon with her, I had to carry her to bed and I couldn't bring myself to leave. Instead, I find myself watching her, memorizing the curve of her cheek, the flutter of her eyelashes against her skin.

She's carrying my children—twins—and the thought sends a primal satisfaction surging through me. I never expected to feel this way about anyone, least of all a human woman who came to me through such circumstances.

But there's something about Trinity that gets under my skin. The way she stood in my study today, demanding what she needed without apology. The fierce independence that burns behind those green eyes even as she softens in my arms.

My hand drifts to her stomach, still flat beneath her nightdress. Somewhere in there, two new lives are forming—my legacy taking shape within her body. She stirs slightly at my touch, murmuring something unintelligible before settling again.

"What am I going to do with you?" I whisper, too softly to wake her.

Because that's the question that keeps me awake. Our arrangement seemed so simple at first—she'd bear my heir, I'd give her freedom. But nothing feels simple anymore. Not when I find myself inventing reasons to be near her, not when I catch myself wondering what it would be like if she stayed.

By her fourth month, Trinity's body begins to change more noticeably. The gentle swell of her belly makes something protective and possessive roar to life inside me. We're in the garden when I first notice her resting her hand there, a subconscious gesture as she examines one of the metallic blooms.

"They're active today," she says without looking up, somehow sensing my approach despite my silent footfalls.

"They can move already?" I ask, closing the distance between us. Without thinking, I place my hand beside hers.

Trinity tenses for a moment—she still does that sometimes, still guards herself—but then relaxes. "Not exactly movement. More like..." She pauses, searching for words. "Like thaliverns. A fluttering sensation."

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I try to imagine it, what it must feel like to have life growing within you. "Does it hurt?"

Her laugh surprises me—bright and genuine. "No. It's strange, but not painful."

She covers my hand with hers, pressing it more firmly against her abdomen. The gesture feels startlingly intimate, more so than the physical release we've shared. This is Trinity letting me in, if only for a moment.

"Thank you," I say, unable to articulate everything I'm feeling.

Her eyes flick up to mine, wary again. "For what?"

"For sharing this with me." I gesture to her stomach. "You didn't have to."

Something flickers across her face—uncertainty, perhaps. "I suppose I didn't."

She steps back then, putting distance between us, and I let her go. There's still so much unsaid between us, so many boundaries drawn in invisible ink. I want to erase them all, but I know Trinity needs them. And if this already fragile thing between us is to survive, I need to respect that.

Even if it's killing me.

"You're hovering again," Trinity points out one evening in her sixth month. She's curled in a chair by the fire, a book abandoned in her lap, her stomach now a pronounced dome beneath her dress.

"I'm not hovering. I'm strategically positioned," I counter, though I know she's right. I've barely left her side all day.

"You had Jackie bring me three blankets."

"You shivered."

"Because a cloud passed overhead and the room was momentarily cooler. I didn't need three blankets."

I drop into the chair opposite hers, running a hand through my hair. "Fine. I'm hovering."

Trinity's expression softens slightly. "Vael, I'm pregnant, not made of glass. Women have been doing this since the beginning of time."

"Not with my children," I mutter, and immediately regret the possessiveness in my tone.

But instead of bristling, Trinity just shakes her head, a small smile playing at her lips. "No, I suppose not."

We sit in companionable silence for a while, the fire crackling between us. I watch her face in the flickering light, the way the flames cast gold across her features. She's beautiful in a way that makes my chest ache.

"What will you do?" I ask suddenly. "After."

Trinity's hands still where they've been absently stroking her belly. "After?"

"When you're free. Where will you go?"

The question has haunted me for months now, growing more insistent as her body swells with our children. Soon she'll give birth, recover, and then—according to our deal—she'll be free to leave.

The thought makes me want to burn something down.

Trinity stares into the fire, avoiding my gaze. "I haven't really thought about it."

It's a lie. I can tell by the way she worries her bottom lip between her teeth. She's thought about it plenty.

"You're a terrible fucking liar," I call her on it, gentle but firm. "You're the most forward-thinking woman I've ever met. You've got plans."

She meets my eyes then, a challenge in her gaze. "Why do you care where I go?"

It's a fair question. According to our arrangement, I shouldn't care. Once she's given me my heirs and recovered, her life is her own again. That was the deal.

"I care," I admit, unable to say more. Unable to tell her that the thought of her walking out of my life makes me feel like someone's ripped a hole in my chest.

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Trinity looks away first, her hands resuming their rhythmic movement over her belly. "I might go to the city," she says finally. "Find work. Make a life for myself."

The words stab at me. A life for herself—without me, without our children. Just as we agreed.

I fucking hate it.

"You'd be good at whatever you chose to do," I say instead of what I really want to say, which is stay with me.

She glances up, surprise flickering across her face. "You think so?"

"I know so. You're intelligent, resourceful. Stubborn as a zarryn," I add with a half-smile. "You'd succeed at anything."

Something complicated passes over her features—gratitude, sadness, and something else I can't name.

"Thank you," she says softly.

I want to cross the space between us, gather her into my arms, tell her she doesn't have to go anywhere. But I made her a promise. Freedom. And if there's one thing I've learned about Trinity, it's that her freedom is precious to her—perhaps because she's had so little of it.

So I remain in my chair, watching her in the firelight, feeling the distance between us

like a physical wound.

By her eighth month, Trinity moves with a waddle that she'd smack me for describing as such. Her belly protrudes dramatically, straining against even the loosest dresses. She tires easily but refuses to admit it, stubbornly pushing herself until I or Jackie intervene.

"I can make it up the stairs by myself," she insists one afternoon, even as she pauses on the second step, one hand braced against her lower back. There's only two more to get back inside and I don't want to see her struggle to make it.

"Of course you can," I agree, standing at the bottom of the staircase. "But why would you want to when I'm offering to carry you?"

She throws me a glare over her shoulder. "Because I'm not an invalid."

"No, you're just growing two entire people inside your body," I point out. "That might entitle you to some assistance."

Trinity huffs but doesn't immediately refuse when I step closer. In fact, I catch a flicker of relief in her eyes before she masks it.

"Fine," she relents. "But only because my feet are swollen."

I scoop her up as gently as possible, cradling her against my chest. She's heavier than before, but still feels small in my arms. Trinity loops her arms around my neck, her face close enough that I can count the freckles across her nose—a smattering that's appeared during her pregnancy.

"You don't have to do this, you know," she says as I carry her upstairs.

"Do what?"

"Take care of me like this. Our agreement only required that you provide for me during the pregnancy. Not that you..." She trails off, clearly uncomfortable.

"Not that I what?" I prompt, reaching the top of the stairs but not setting her down.

"Act like you care about me," she finishes quietly.

I stop walking, staring down at her. Does she really think I'm just acting? That everything between us is still just about our arrangement?

"Trinity," I begin, but she shakes her head.

"It's fine. I understand. You want to ensure the babies are healthy. I'm just the means to that end."

The words hit like a physical blow. Is that what she thinks? That I only care about her because of the children she carries?

"That's not—" I start, but she squirms in my arms.

"You can put me down now."

I set her on her feet reluctantly, my hands lingering around her waist to ensure she's steady.

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"Thanks for the help," she says, already moving away, retreating emotionally as much as physically.

I watch her go, frustration building in my chest. How can she still not see what's happening between us? Or is she deliberately choosing not to—protecting herself by maintaining the emotional distance of our original arrangement?

Perhaps, I realize with a sinking feeling, she really does intend to leave once the babies are born. Perhaps all my hopes that something more might grow between us have been one-sided fantasies.

The thought leaves me cold, even as the more practical part of my brain reminds me that this was always the plan. She would give me heirs, I would give her freedom. That was our deal. Nothing more.

But standing in the hallway, watching her disappear into her room, I know with bone-deep certainty that I want more. Much more.

The question is, does Trinity?

18

TRINITY

The first pain hits like lightning striking through my body, shocking me awake from a fitful sleep. I gasp, clutching at my swollen belly, the sheets tangling around my legs as I struggle to sit up.

"Vael," I whisper, then louder as another wave crashes over me, "Vael!"

The door to my room flies open so quickly it's clear he wasn't far away. His tall silhouette fills the doorframe, red-gold eyes practically glowing in the darkness.

"What's wrong?" His voice is tight with concern.

"I think—" My words cut off as another spasm seizes me. I grab the bedpost, knuckles turning white. "They're coming."

He's beside me in an instant, one large hand covering mine on the bedpost, the other hovering uncertainly.

"Tell me what to do," he says, and the vulnerability in his deep voice nearly undoes me.

"Get Jackie," I manage between clenched teeth. "And send for Mireva."

He hesitates, clearly reluctant to leave my side.

"Go!" I command, attempting a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. "I'm not having these babies this second."

The next hours blur into a haze of pain and preparation. Jackie arrives first, her practical efficiency exactly what I need. She helps me into a birthing gown, arranges the room, and places a cool cloth on my forehead.

"You're doing great," she assures me, her platinum braid swinging as she moves about the room. "First babies always take their time."

Vael paces like a caged predator, his imposing frame making the spacious room

suddenly feel small. Every time I gasp or moan, he's at my side instantly, looking as terrified as I feel.

"Where the fuck is Mireva?" he growls after a particularly brutal contraction leaves me breathless.

As if summoned by his curse, the healer glides into the room, her sea-glass eyes taking in the scene with serene assessment. Her green-black locs are tied back, and her bronze skin seems to shimmer in the lamplight.

"The children choose their own time," she says cryptically, setting her bag of herbs and implements beside the bed. Her cool hands press against my stomach, and I swear I can feel energy flowing from her fingers into my skin. "And they seem quite determined to meet their parents."

The labor intensifies as night gives way to dawn. I lose track of time, aware only of the rising and falling waves of pain. Through it all, Vael refuses to leave, even when Jackie suggests he might wait outside.

"I'm staying," he says with such fierce determination that no one argues further.

He sits behind me, supporting my weight against his chest, his strong arms creating a fortress around me. I've never been held like this—like I'm something precious, something worth protecting.

"You're the strongest person I've ever known," he murmurs against my hair during a brief respite between contractions. "You can do this, Trinity."

The pain returns before I can respond, more intense than before. I cry out, unable to hold back.

"That's it," Mireva encourages, positioning herself at the foot of the bed. "It's time to push now."

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I bear down, squeezing Vael's hands so hard I'm certain I must be hurting him, but he doesn't flinch. My entire world narrows to this single task—bringing our child into the world.

"I can see the head," Mireva announces. "One more push."

With a primal scream that seems to come from some deep, untapped well within me, I push. There's a moment of searing pressure, then blessed relief as our first baby slides into the world.

The tiny, indignant cry that follows is the most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

"A girl," Mireva says, quickly wrapping the squirming infant in a soft cloth. "A beautiful daughter."

Jackie moves to take the baby, and Mireva hands our daughter over. "Trinity, get ready for the next."

Before I can even fear having to go through it again, my body seizes with another contraction.

The second birth happens faster than the first. Within minutes, another cry joins the first, and Mireva holds up our second daughter, slightly smaller than her sister but just as perfect.

"Two daughters," the healer announces, her usually inscrutable face breaking into a rare smile. "Both healthy and strong."

Jackie helps clean and swaddle the babies while Mireva tends to me. I lean back against Vael's chest, exhausted beyond words but filled with a strange, new emotion I can't quite name.

"Look what you did," Vael whispers, his voice thick with emotion as Jackie brings our daughters to us. "Look what you made, Trinity."

I gaze down at the two tiny faces, one with soft, dark brown hair and gold-flecked eyes, the other with wavy black hair and eyes that shift between red and amber in the light.

"We made them," I correct him softly, a tear sliding down my cheek. "Both of us."

Vael's arms tighten around me, and I feel something wet against my hair. When I tilt my head back, I see tears tracking down his ash-gray cheeks. This fearsome demon, this dangerous bounty hunter, is crying as he looks at our daughters.

Something shifts inside me then—a wall crumbling, a door opening—and I realize with startling clarity that our arrangement has become something else entirely when I wasn't paying attention.

"Would you like to hold them?" Jackie asks, already moving to place one of the bundles in my arms.

I nod, suddenly desperate to feel their weight, to know they're real. The first baby—our firstborn—settles against my chest, her tiny fingers flexing against the blanket. Vael carefully accepts our second daughter, his massive hands dwarfing her small form with such gentleness it makes my heart ache.

"Hello," I whisper to the babies, my voice breaking. "I'm your mother."

I stare down at these tiny creatures we've created, and something profound happens inside me. A surge of emotion so powerful it steals my breath—the same sensation I felt when I first saw them, but stronger now as I cradle our firstborn against my chest.

"She's looking right at me," I whisper, captivated by the golden eyes gazing up with an intensity that seems impossible for a newborn.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I never wanted this. I was meant to fulfill our bargain—bear Vael's children, then walk away to start my life. Freedom was the goal, not... this overwhelming feeling constricting my chest. Not this fierce, consuming love.

"They're both perfect," Vael murmurs. He hasn't moved away since the birth, still pressed against my back like he can't bear to increase the distance between us. His chin rests lightly on my shoulder as he gazes down at our daughters.

The tiny bundle in his arms makes a soft sound, and he immediately adjusts his hold, those deadly bounty hunter hands impossibly gentle. "Shhh, little one. Your father's here."

Your father. The words hang in the air between us.

Jackie finishes cleaning up and approaches the bed with a warm smile. "They'll need names." She tucks a strand of platinum hair behind her ear. "Strong ones, for strong girls."

I glance up at Vael, suddenly unsure. We'd never discussed names—another sign of how much I'd been lying to myself about my involvement in their lives.

"Liora," I say, surprising myself. The name falls from my lips unbidden, as if it had been waiting there all along. I touch the soft brown hair of the baby in my arms. "This

one is Liora."

Vael's eyes meet mine, something unfathomable in their red-gold depths. "Liora," he repeats, testing the sound. His lips curl into a smile. "It suits her." He looks down at our second daughter, whose eyes now blink open to reveal their red-amber color. "And this fierce one?"

"Kaelin." The name comes as naturally as breathing. "She looks like a fighter."

"Like her mother." His voice is gruff with emotion.

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Mireva, who's been quietly gathering her supplies, pauses by the bed. "Good names. Strong names." She places a hand briefly on each child's head. "These two will forge their own paths in this world."

After Mireva and Jackie leave us alone, promising to return soon to check on us, I find myself unable to take my eyes off the twins. Liora snuggles against me, serene and watchful, while Kaelin squirms in Vael's arms, already making her presence known with tiny, indignant noises.

"Here, let me..." Vael carefully transfers Kaelin into my other arm so I'm holding both girls. He slides off the bed, and for a panicked moment, I think he's leaving. Instead, he kneels beside us, one large hand spanning both tiny bodies.

"Look what you've done," he says again, voice thick with wonder.

"I never thought I'd feel this way," I admit, the confession breaking free before I can stop it. "I didn't want to be a mother."

"And now?" His eyes search mine.

I look down at our daughters. "Now I can't imagine anything else." The truth of it shakes me to my core. "They're... they're a part of me. Of us."

Vael rises just enough to press his forehead against mine, his horns carefully angled away. "I told myself this was about legacy, about duty." His voice drops to a whisper. "I was wrong."

He stands abruptly and paces to the window, his broad shoulders tense against the backdrop of Aerasak's crimson sky. When he turns back, his face is transformed by a tenderness I've never seen before.

"I'm going to build them a nursery," he announces suddenly. "Right through there." He points to the wall adjacent to my bedroom. "With a connecting door, so you—we—can reach them easily." His hands gesture animatedly. "And they'll need toys, and... what else do babies need?"

I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. This is the same demon who once told me with cold certainty that his only interest was in producing an heir. "They need time, Vael. They were just born."

He runs a hand through his tousled black hair. "I want them to have everything. Everything I never had."

And I can see through the panic that he already loves our girls as much as I do.

That cracks another wall around my heart, but I'm too drained right now to care.

19

VAEL

I'm changing Kaelin's wrappings when I sense my mother's presence approaching the house. The distinctive prickle at the back of my neck has always announced her arrival since I was a child—a survival instinct I developed early. My hands still over my daughter's tiny body, her red-amber eyes blinking up at me with curious innocence.

"Your grandmother's here," I tell her, my voice automatically softening in a way that

would shock anyone who knows me as Aerasak's most ruthless bounty hunter. "Try not to spit up on her expensive clothes."

Kaelin gurgles something that sounds suspiciously like agreement, tiny fists punching the air. Even at a few days old, she's already showing more spirit than most full-grown demons. I finish securing her fresh wrappings and lift her carefully against my chest, her weight almost nothing in my hands.

Trinity appears in the doorway, Liora nestled against her shoulder. Dark circles shadow her eyes, her brown hair falling loose around her face. Despite the exhaustion etched in every line of her body, she's never looked more beautiful to me.

"I heard a carriage," she says, voice raspy with fatigue.

"My mother." I can't keep the tension from my voice. "I'll handle this. You should rest."

Trinity's spine straightens immediately, her green eyes narrowing. "I'm fine."

"You've slept maybe four hours total since they were born." I step closer, careful of the precious bundle against my chest. "She's here to see the twins, not interrogate you."

"Shouldn't I be present when your mother meets our daughters?" The stubborn set of her jaw would be infuriating if I didn't admire it so damn much.

Before I can answer, the front door opens and closes with authoritative precision. No knocking, of course. Kaelesha Rennick has never believed in announcing herself when entering her son's home.

"Vaelrix?" My mother's voice carries through the house. "Where are my

granddaughters?"

Trinity's eyes widen slightly. "She sounds..."

"Excited," I finish, equally surprised. "Go lie down. I swear I'll wake you if she starts plotting world domination."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "Fine. One hour." She transfers Liora carefully to my free arm, our fingers brushing in the exchange. "But if I hear anything suspicious?—"

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"You'll what? Storm down the stairs and defeat the most powerful demoness in Aerasak's business world with your sleep-deprived glare?"

"It's worked on you," she counters, already backing toward the bed.

I suppress a smile and turn away with both twins cradled against me. My mother's footsteps sound on the stairs, precise and measured.

When I step into the hallway, Kaelesha is already halfway up, her tall figure commanding attention as always. Her horns—larger and more elaborately curved than mine—are adorned with gold cuffs that match her impeccably tailored suit. Not a hair out of place in her severe updo, not a wrinkle on her ash-gray skin.

She stops when she sees me, her red-gold eyes—so like mine—widening at the sight of the two bundles in my arms.

"Vaelrix," she breathes, and for once, there's no criticism in her voice, no calculation in her gaze. "Let me see them."

I move down the stairs carefully, hyper-aware of every step, every movement. My mother reaches the landing and approaches with uncharacteristic hesitation.

"Two daughters," she says, peering at their tiny faces. "The messenger only said the human had delivered successfully."

"Trinity," I correct automatically. "Her name is Trinity."

My mother's eyes flick to mine briefly, but she doesn't press. Instead, she reaches out one perfectly manicured finger to touch Liora's cheek. "May I?"

The request throws me. I can't remember the last time my mother asked permission for anything. I nod, carefully transferring Liora into her waiting arms.

"This is Liora," I say, watching my mother's face closely. "And this is Kaelin."

My mother cradles Liora with unexpected proficiency, her entire demeanor softening as she gazes down at my daughter's face. "Hello, little one," she coos, her voice transformed into something I've never heard before. "Aren't you just perfect? Yes, you are."

Liora blinks up at her with those golden eyes, and my mother gasps softly. "She has our eyes. Both of them do, despite being..."

"Half-human," I finish, tensing for the criticism.

But my mother simply nods, still captivated by Liora's face. "Our bloodline runs strong. They're beautiful, Vaelrix." She looks up at me with genuine emotion. "You've done well."

Something loosens in my chest—a knot of tension I didn't realize I'd been carrying since I sent word of the births.

"Let's sit," I suggest, heading toward the sitting room. "Trinity's resting upstairs."

My mother follows, still murmuring softly to Liora. When we're settled on opposite chairs, she finally tears her gaze from my daughter.

"They both look healthy. Strong." She strokes Liora's cheek again. "This one has your

thoughtfulness. I can see it already."

"And this one has your temper," I reply, nodding to Kaelin who stirs restlessly against me.

To my shock, my mother laughs—a genuine sound I haven't heard in decades. "May I hold her too?"

We exchange babies with careful coordination, and my mother's expert handling makes me wonder about her early days with me, before ambition consumed her completely.

"Your father would have been proud," she says suddenly, and the unexpected mention of him—a subject never discussed—leaves me momentarily speechless.

I sit in comfortable silence with my mother, watching her rock Kaelin with surprising gentleness. The room feels different somehow—warmer, less formal. The weapons displayed on my walls and the trophies from successful hunts suddenly seem at odds with the tiny lives we're holding.

"They'll need protection," my mother says, breaking the quiet. "Powerful children always attract attention."

"They have me," I respond, the possessiveness in my voice surprising even myself.

She nods approvingly. "Yes, they do. But they should also have proper education. I can arrange for the best tutors when they're old enough."

Instead of bristling at her interference as I normally would, I find myself considering it. "That would be... helpful."

"And what of their mother?" She asks the question casually, but I know better.

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"Trinity needs time to recover." I keep my voice neutral, though something fierce and protective surges through me at the mention of her name. "We haven't discussed what comes after."

My mother's eyes narrow slightly. "The arrangement was temporary, as I recall."

"It was."

"And yet?" She raises one perfectly arched eyebrow.

I look down at Liora, sleeping peacefully in my arms. Her tiny features—so much like Trinity's, yet with unmistakable traces of demon heritage—stir something profound in my chest.

"And yet nothing has gone according to plan since the moment I met her," I admit.

To my surprise, my mother chuckles. "Love rarely does."

I snap my head up. "I didn't say anything about?—"

"You didn't have to." She traces a finger gently over Kaelin's cheek. "I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at her... or these little ones."

The observation lands like a physical blow. I've been so focused on navigating these unfamiliar feelings that I hadn't realized how transparent they've made me.

"It's not weakness, Vaelrix," my mother says, reading my thoughts as she's always

been able to do. "Caring for your family—protecting what's yours—that's our most fundamental strength."

I exhale slowly, looking at my daughter's peaceful face. "I didn't expect this. Any of it."

"The best things in life are rarely expected." She transfers Kaelin back to me with practiced ease. "Now, I have meetings to attend, but I'll return next week with gifts for my granddaughters."

I walk her to the door, both twins cradled against my chest. She pauses at the threshold, reaching up to touch my face—a gesture so unexpected I nearly flinch.

"You've created something beautiful here, Vaelrix. Don't let your pride ruin it."

With that cryptic advice, she's gone, leaving me standing in the doorway with my daughters warm against my chest.

I carry the twins upstairs, their tiny bodies nestled perfectly against me. The nursery I built adjacent to Trinity's room is bathed in soft light from enchanted lanterns that glow like trapped stars. I bought each piece of furniture myself, carved the wooden cribs with protective runes hidden in decorative patterns, selected the softest fabrics for their bedding.

I place them in their cribs with care, marveling at how something so small could command my entire existence so completely. Kaelin squirms, her tiny fists batting the air before settling. Liora simply sighs, her gold eyes blinking slowly before closing.

"How did you two take over my life so completely?" I whisper, trailing a finger over Kaelin's cheek. "I've tracked the most dangerous criminals across two planets without hesitation, but the thought of anything happening to either of you terrifies me."

A knock at the front door pulls me from my reverie. I check that both girls are settled before quietly closing the nursery door, leaving it open just enough to hear if they wake.

Trinity's door is closed, and I pause outside it, listening for her steady breathing. Good. She's finally getting some rest.

The knock comes again as I descend the stairs. I pull open the door to find a courier—a young demon with barely-sprouting horns—clutching a sealed document.

"Bounty Hunter Rennick?" he asks, eyes widening as he takes in my full height.

"What is it?" I keep my voice low.

"New contract, sir. High priority." He thrusts the document toward me. "Commissioner Drez said you'd want to see it immediately, despite your... leave of absence."

I take the sealed parchment, noticing the official stamp of Aerasak's Bounty Commission. "Wait here."

Breaking the seal, I unfold the document and scan its contents. Shock rolls through me as the target's name jumps out at me.

Captain Drez'kor of Galmoleth.

The face sketched on the parchment is unmistakable—the same demon who had his hands on Trinity at that party, the one who planned to claim her permanently. The same one I tricked with a false messenger to get him away from her.

Charged with conspiracy, theft of valuable assets, and abandonment of post.

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A slow, dangerous smile spreads across my face. Perhaps it's petty, perhaps it's beneath me, but the thought of hunting down the demon who thought to own Trinity—who I know has touched her and used her in ways that make me spiral with rage—sends a surge of vicious satisfaction through me.

"Tell Commissioner Drez I accept." I hand the courier a generous tip. "I'll be in touch regarding the capture."

After closing the door, I stand in my entryway, the bounty documentation still in my hand. The timing couldn't be more perfect—or more inconvenient. With newborn twins and Trinity still recovering, I should be refusing any contracts.

But for this one? For the chance to capture the captain who thought he could claim what's mine?

Worth it.

20

TRINITY

I wake with a start, disoriented in the dim light filtering through the heavy curtains. For one terrifying moment, I'm back in the dungeons—but then Kaelin's unmistakable cry reaches me, followed by Liora's softer whimpers. My daughters. Not the dungeons. Vael's house.

Our house? No. Not mine. Never mine.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, my body protesting every movement. It's been three weeks since the twins were born, and while the physical pain has subsided to a dull ache, exhaustion still clings to me like a second skin.

"I've got them," Vael's deep voice calls from the nursery. "Go back to sleep."

It's still strange, hearing that dangerous voice softened for the babies—for me. I push myself up anyway, drawn to them like a moth to flame.

"I'm already awake," I say, padding across the polished floor to the adjoining room.

The nursery glows with soft amber light from the enchanted lanterns. Vael stands between the cribs, his massive frame somehow gentle as he lifts Kaelin. The contrast of his ash-grayskin against her paler tone makes my heart twist in ways I don't understand.

"She's hungry," he says without turning, somehow knowing I'm there. "Liora's just fussy because her sister is loud."

I move to Liora's crib, gathering her up against my shoulder. "Takes after her father that way," I murmur, breathing in her sweet scent. "Always making noise when she wants attention."

Vael's eyes glint in the low light as he turns, Kaelin nestled in one massive arm. "I don't recall you complaining about my noise-making before."

Heat rushes to my face. This new rhythm between us—this comfortable, almost domestic banter—is more dangerous than any dungeon.

"You're impossible." I settle into the padded rocking chair, adjusting my nightdress to feed Liora first.

Vael passes Kaelin to me once Liora's finished, taking our satiated daughter with practiced ease. How quickly he's adapted to this, this softness that seems so at odds with everything I first knew about him. The fearsome bounty hunter who now sings lullabies in a rumbling baritone when he thinks no one's listening.

"Jackie's coming early today," he says, gently patting Liora's back. "I need to go into town."

I look up from Kaelin's hungry face. "Another bounty?"

"Just supplies." His expression gives nothing away, but I've learned to read the tension in his shoulders.

"You're a terrible liar for someone who hunts people for a living."

One corner of his mouth lifts. "I don't lie to you."

"Not directly." I stroke Kaelin's cheek as she feeds. "But omission is its own kind of deception."

Vael sighs, the sound heavy with something unsaid. "It's nothing for you to worry about. I'll be back before dinner."

"I'm not worried." I keep my eyes on Kaelin, avoiding his piercing gaze. "The schedule works. You hunt, I watch them, Jackie helps during the day. We've found our rhythm."

The silence that follows feels charged, dangerous. When I finally look up, Vael is watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

"Is that all this is to you? A schedule?"

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I swallow hard. "It's what we agreed to."

"We agreed to a lot of things that don't seem to matter anymore." He places Liora back in her crib, his movements careful despite the tension in his voice.

Before I can respond, Jackie's distinctive knock sounds from downstairs. Saved by the human.

"That's early even for her," I say, grateful for the interruption.

Vael nods, casting one last look at me that I can't decipher before heading downstairs.

I finish feeding Kaelin, holding her against me longer than necessary. Her tiny weight anchors me in reality when everything else feels like shifting sand beneath my feet.

By the time I make it downstairs with both babies, Jackie's already bustling around the kitchen, her platinum blonde braid swinging as she moves. The shaved sides of her head catch the morning light, making her look like she's wearing a metallic crown.

"There they are!" She beams at the sight of us, immediately abandoning whatever she was mixing to take Liora from my arms. "How's my favorite little troublemaker today?"

"Quiet for now." I adjust Kaelin against my shoulder. "Her sister made up for it overnight."

"These two are gonna keep you on your toes," Jackie laughs, bouncing Liora gently. "Good thing you've got the big scary demon to help."

I glance toward the doorway where Vael has reappeared, dressed in his hunting leathers. The sight of him like this—armed and dangerous—creates a jarring contrast to the gentle father who held our daughters moments ago.

"I won't be gone long." He approaches, one hand coming to rest on my lower back while he peers down at Kaelin. "Try to get some sleep while Jackie's here."

"I always try." I offer him a small smile. "Be careful."

His eyes soften in a way reserved only for these quiet moments. "Always am."

When he's gone, Jackie settles Liora in the cushioned basket she keeps in the kitchen. "You look like death warmed over, sweetie. Go take a proper bath. I've got these two monsters."

"They're hardly monsters," I protest, though I'm already imagining the luxury of hot water.

"Says you." Jackie grins, taking Kaelin from my arms. "Go. Before I change my mind."

The bathwater is incredible, scented with oils Jackie brought that she swears help with healing. I sink into it gratefully, letting my head rest against the edge of the tub.

This routine we've fallen into feels dangerously comfortable. Jackie arrives each morning, bringing warmth and chatter into a house that was once cold and empty. She cooks, cleans, and helps with the twins while telling stories about her wife Donna and their life in the city.

Vael returns in the evenings, sometimes bloodied from his hunts but always softening the moment he sees the girls. He takes them without hesitation, freeing me to eat or bathe or simply breathe. We've developed a wordless dance, passing babies between us, anticipating needs before they're spoken.

At night, he sleeps in his room, I in mine, with the twins between us in the nursery—a physical manifestation of the unspoken barrier we maintain despite everything that's changed.

I close my eyes, sinking deeper into the water. This wasn't the plan. None of this was the plan.

The plan was to bear his heir and leave.

The plan was to never care.

The plan was freedom.

But as I listen to Jackie's cheerful voice floating up from the kitchen, cooing nonsense to my daughters, I wonder what freedom really means anymore.

I wrap myself in a soft robe after my bath, a small luxury I'm still not used to. The house is quiet—suspiciously quiet for a place with newborn twins. Following the silence, I pad down the hallway toward the main living space.

I stop at the threshold, the scene before me freezing me in place.

Vael sits cross-legged on the plush rug by the hearth, both twins nestled in his massive arms. His deep voice rumbles through the room as he speaks, those dangerous red-gold eyes soft as he looks down at our daughters.

"—and that's how your father tracked the most notorious thief on three planets through the caverns of Shozuh with nothing but a broken compass and pure stubbornness."

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Jackie sits nearby, her platinum braid falling over one shoulder as she folds tiny clothes. She catches my eye and smiles but says nothing to alert Vael to my presence.

"Your father embellishes," I say, stepping into the room. "I've heard the actual story from Domno, and there was significantly more stumbling involved."

Vael looks up, and something in his expression makes my chest tighten. He told me he was never letting me meet another one of his so-called friends after I met Domno a few monthsback. "Domno would say that. He was the one who fell into the acid pools."

I settle on the edge of a chair, watching as Liora waves her tiny fist as if trying to grab her father's words from the air. "Funny how that detail never makes it into your telling."

"Details are subjective." His mouth quirks up at one corner as he adjusts Kaelin in his arms. "Some just matter more than others."

"Like the part where you were the one who pushed him?"

Jackie snorts, smoothing a tiny dress with her palm. "No wonder he talks shit about you."

"Language," Vael and I say in unison, then look at each other in surprise.

"Oh please," Jackie rolls her ice-blue eyes. "Like these two aren't going to grow up hearing worse from both of you. Especially you." She points at Vael with a folded

sock.

Before he can defend himself, Kaelin lets out a distressed wail followed by a distinct and unmistakable smell.

"Speaking of shit," Jackie mutters, rising quickly. "That's my cue to start dinner."

Vael doesn't hesitate. He stands smoothly, Liora secure in one arm while he carries the fussing Kaelin toward the changing table in the corner—another addition to the main living space that has transformed this once-austere hunter's lodge into something else entirely.

"You can hand her to me," I offer, moving to take Kaelin.

"I've got it." He's already laying her down, his large hands impossibly gentle as he unfastens the soiled diaper. "You just had your bath. No sense in both of us smelling like a tuskram pen."

I hover nearby, watching as this deadly bounty hunter—this demon who terrifies half of Aerasak—coos nonsense at our daughter while efficiently cleaning her.

"You're getting good at that," I say, taking Liora from his other arm to make the task easier.

"Necessity breeds skill." He secures a fresh diaper with practiced movements. "Though I still maintain babies should come with more instruction."

I laugh, bouncing Liora gently as she starts to fuss in solidarity with her sister. "What would the great Vaelrix do with an instruction manual? You've never followed directions in your life."

"I followed yours." His eyes meet mine over Kaelin's squirming form, intense and unguarded. "That night in Asmodeus's hall, when you told me exactly what you thought of demons. I remember every word."

The memory of our first meeting washes over me—how small I'd felt in that opulent room full of demons, how defiant I'd been despite my fear. How he'd looked at me like I was the only person there worth seeing.

"You didn't follow them very well," I murmur. "I recall making it clear you should leave me alone."

"And yet." He lifts Kaelin up, pressing his face briefly to her tiny belly, making her squeal with what might be laughter. "Here we are."

Here we are indeed. In this house that no longer feels cold. With these children who bear both our features. With this strange, dangerous man who looks at our daughters like they hold the universe in their tiny hands.

Liora reaches up, her small fingers brushing my chin, drawing my attention back to her. Her eyes—not quite his, not quite mine—look up at me with a focus that seems impossible for one so young.

"Here we are," I echo, feeling something shift inside me like sand settling after a storm.

21

VAEL

I crouch in the shadows of the ruined temple, muscles coiled tight as I scan the crumbling plaza below. The sky above Galmoleth has darkened to that peculiar

crimson-black that makes tracking easier—for me, at least. The captain won't have my advantages in the dark.

If the bastard even shows up this time.

A cool wind sweeps through the broken columns, carrying the scent of decay and something else—something familiar that makes my nostrils flare. Someone's been here recently. Someone demonic.

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I shift silently, adjusting the weight of the blades strapped across my back. Three weeks of chasing this particular shadow, and I'm running out of patience. The twins are growing every day I'm away. Trinity is...

Trinity is not mine to think about right now.

"You're getting sloppy, Captain," I murmur, examining the fresh claw marks gouged into ancient stone. Drez'kor always did have a temper. I trace one furrow with my fingertip, finding it still warm to the touch. "Very sloppy."

A sound—barely audible—pulls my attention toward the eastern passage. I melt deeper into shadow, my ash-gray skin a perfect camouflage against the darkness. The heavy thud of boots approaches, accompanied by ragged breathing. Not the captain. Someone injured.

I draw a blade silently, balancing its familiar weight in my palm.

A figure stumbles into the plaza—a lesser demon, clutching his side where black ichor seeps between his fingers. His eyes dart wildly, scanning the ruins before he collapses against a fallen column.

I'm on him before he can register movement, blade pressed to his throat.

"Where is he?" I keep my voice low, applying just enough pressure to break skin.

The demon's eyes widen with recognition. "Vaelrix? Fuck—I thought you were him coming back?—"

"Drez'kor. Where?"

His laugh turns into a pained cough. "Gone. Again. Bastard knew you were coming. Left me to bleed out as a distraction."

I press harder. "Not good enough. Talk."

"He's got...friends in high places now." Blood bubbles at the corner of his mouth. "Said to tell you...you're chasing ghosts. Whatever that means."

I growl, frustration bubbling through my veins like acid. The captain has evaded me for weeks, always one step ahead. No one slips my grasp this easily. No one.

"What's your connection?" I demand, searching his face for signs of deception.

"Just muscle. Hired help." His breathing shallows. "Said you'd be sniffing around because of some human...bitch."

My blade slices deeper before I can check the impulse. "Watch your tongue."

His eyes widen further. "Fuck—it's true then? The great Vaelrix, tamed by a human?" Another wet cough. "Captain said you'd gotten soft."

I lean closer, letting him see the fury in my eyes. "Does this feel soft to you?"

The demon swallows hard against my blade. "Look—he's crossed to Aerasak. I imagine he's on Ikoth. Has some business with a collector there. That's all I know. I swear it on the void."

I ease the pressure slightly. "A collector? What business?"

"Don't know details. Just heard him mention something about a trade. Something valuable." His eyes glaze slightly. "He won't stop talking about revenge, though. Says you took something that belongs to him."

The implication hits me like a physical blow, but I keep my expression neutral. "When does he meet the collector?"

"Three days. The obsidian falls." His head lolls slightly. "I need a healer, or I won't make it."

I stand, wiping my blade on my leathers. "You'll make it. And then you'll deliver a message. Tell your captain that if he values what remains of his miserable existence, he'll forget about the human woman. Tell him she belongs to me now."

The demon's eyes widen. "He won't like that."

I sheathe my blade with a sharp click. "I'm counting on it."

I leave him there, bleeding but alive—a messenger to carry my challenge. The eastern territories are at least a day's hard travel, which gives me time to return home and prepare. Something feels wrong about this whole pursuit, like I'm being led in circles.

Back at my carriage, I retrieve the tracking stones I've collected—each one vibrating with different intensities, supposedly leading to the captain's location. Three weeks, five different stones, and each pointing in contradictory directions. This isn't coincidence.

I slam my fist into the carriage wall, denting the reinforced metal.

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"Damn it!"

No one has ever eluded me like this. No one has picked apart my tracking methods so effectively. It's like trying to catch smoke with bare hands.

I pull out a communication crystal, knowing I should tell Trinity I'll be delayed again. The eastern territories are dangerous—even for me.

But these thoughts of Trinity, of the twins... they're exactly the distraction the captain is counting on. The vulnerability he's looking to exploit.

I pocket the crystal unused. The captain wants me distracted, wants me torn between the hunt and home. That's not a game I'm willing to play.

I secure my weapons and prepare for the journey east, a growl building in my chest. I'm coming for you, Captain. And when I find you, you'll learn why they whisper my name in the dark corners of Aerasak.

I push my carriage faster than I should across the rugged terrain, every fiber of my being pulling toward home. Three days in the eastern territories yielded nothing but more frustration—the captain had vanished again, the "collector" nowhere to be found. Another trail gone cold.

But with each mile closer to home, thoughts of the hunt fade, replaced by images of Trinity and the twins. My chest tightens with an unfamiliar ache. The realization that I've been counting the days—hours even—since I last saw their faces unsettles me.

Demons don't pine. We don't yearn. We take what we want and discard what no longer serves us.

Yet here I am, urging the zarryn to a dangerous pace, desperate to arrive before the twins are put down for the night.

When my home finally appears on the horizon—black stone silhouetted against the crimson sky—I feel something suspiciously like relief wash over me. I school my features into neutrality as I approach. Trinity doesn't need to see how much her absence affected me. She doesn't need that burden.

The door opens before I reach it. Jackie stands there, her round human face lighting up with recognition.

"You're back earlier than expected," she says, stepping aside. "They're in the nursery."

I stride past her without answering, following the soft sounds echoing down the hallway. The scent of milk and the sweet, distinctive smell of the twins grows stronger. And beneath it all—Trinity's scent, like sunlight on warm skin.

I pause at the nursery door, watching silently. Trinity stands with her back to me, humming softly as she rocks Kaelin. My breath catches at the sight of her silhouetted against the window, the crimson light of Aerasak's sunset turning her brown waves to copper. Liora sleeps peacefully in her bassinet, tiny fingers curled into fists.

For a moment, I allow myself to imagine this is my reality—not a temporary arrangement, but my life. My family.

Trinity turns, sensing my presence. Surprise flickers across her features before she composes herself.

"You're back," she says softly, careful not to disturb Kaelin, who's drifting to sleep in her arms.

I cross the room in three strides, peering down at Kaelin's peaceful face. "Miss anything interesting?" My voice comes out rougher than intended.

"Liora smiled yesterday. A real smile, not just gas." Trinity's own smile appears, tentative but genuine. "And this one—" she glances down at Kaelin "—has discovered her lungs. Properly discovered them."

I allow myself to touch Kaelin's cheek with one finger, marveling at the silken softness of her skin. "Show me," I murmur, holding my arms out.

Trinity hesitates for only a fraction of a second before transferring Kaelin to my embrace. Our hands brush in the exchange, and I resist the urge to prolong the contact.

"How was your... business?" Trinity asks, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She never asks directly about my hunts, maintaining the fiction that I'm merely attending to some vague professional matters.

"Unfinished," I reply, breathing in Kaelin's scent as I cradle her. "But not urgent."

Trinity nods, turning to adjust Liora's blanket unnecessarily. "Jackie made enough dinner for two. If you're hungry."

I watch her movements, cataloging the shifts in her posture, the careful way she avoids meeting my eyes for too long. She's grown more comfortable in my home—my territory—but maintains certain boundaries. Boundaries I know better than to push against.

"I'll take over," I say, nodding toward the twins. "You should eat."

"I'm not?—"

"You're still recovering," I cut her off, keeping my voice low. "And you've been alone with them all day. Take a break, Trinity."

She looks ready to argue, then her shoulders relax slightly. "Fine. But call if they need anything."

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I nod, though we both know I won't. I've learned more about infant care in the past weeks than most demons learn in a lifetime. I know what my daughters need.

My daughters. The thought still sends a shock through my system.

Trinity lingers at the doorway. "Vael?"

I look up, fighting to keep my expression neutral.

"It's good that you're back." She says it quickly, as if the words might burn if held too long on her tongue, then disappears down the hallway.

I settle into the rocking chair with Kaelin, carefully adjusting my large frame to the human-sized furniture. With one hand, I reach out to rest my palm on Liora's rising chest, connecting myself to both my children at once.

"Your mother is stubborn," I whisper to them. "Almost as stubborn as me."

Kaelin stirs, her tiny face scrunching before relaxing again. I find myself memorizing every detail—the curve of her nose, the exact shade of her eyelashes, the way her fingers curl around mine when I offer my hand.

I don't know how many more moments like this I'll have. Don't know when Trinity will decide she's healed enough, strong enough to start the life of freedom I promised her. The thought cuts deeper than any blade.

Because I desperately hope she doesn't leave.

TRINITY

I slip out of the bed, unable to take being in here any longer. The sheets whisper against my skin as I move, my bare feet silent on the cool stone floor. Moonlight filters through the gap in the curtains, painting silver stripes across the floor.

On my way to the nursery, I pause in the hall, peeking through Vael's partially open door. He doesn't want to close it in case the girls need him. I can't help but stare at him, at the way moonlight casts across his sleeping form.

This vulnerability of his while sleeping still startles me. In waking hours, he's all coiled power and sharp edges. But in sleep, the hard lines of his face soften, and I'm left wondering what it might be like to truly belong here.

But I don't belong. Not really.

The nursery door makes no sound as I ease it open, slipping inside to check on the twins. Both sleep peacefully, their tiny chests rising and falling in perfect synchronicity. I brush a finger across Liora's cheek, marveling at how she already has Vael's stubborn chin. Kaelin stirs slightly, her rosebud mouth working in her sleep.

"Sweet dreams," I whisper, willing it to be true for them even if it isn't for me.

Back in the hallway, I pause. The thought of going to Vael's bed—of curling against his warmth—beckons like a siren song. But the lingering tendrils of my nightmare still claw at my consciousness, making me restless.

Instead, I find myself wandering to the kitchen, lighting a single lamp with trembling fingers. The flame casts dancing shadows across the walls as I prepare a cup of

meadowmint tea, hoping it might quiet the chaos in my mind.

The same nightmare. Three nights running now.

I settle at the kitchen table, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. Outside, Aerasak's strange, crimson moon bathes everything in bloody light. Even after months here, I still find the alien sky unsettling.

"You're not there anymore," I remind myself, voice barely audible in the quiet kitchen. "You're safe."

But am I? The question lingers as I sip my tea, wincing as it burns my tongue.

My mind drifts back to the nightmare—so vivid I can still smell the smoke, feel the twigs snapping beneath my feet as I ran. In reality, I never had a chance to run. The attack on my village had been swift, efficient. One moment I was hanging laundry to dry, the next I was thrown over a demon's shoulder like a sack of zynthra.

But in my dreams, I always run. Through familiar woods now set ablaze, past the burning shells of homes I'd known all my life. The screams of neighbors, of friends, providing a horrific backdrop to my flight.

And always, always, the sound of pursuit behind me. Heavy footfalls crushing undergrowth. The hot breath of a predator at my neck. Sometimes I glimpse him—the captain, his cruel smile gleaming in the firelight as he stalks me through the inferno.

"You're mine," he'd growl, voice scraping like stone against metal. "You'll always be mine."

I shudder, spilling tea onto the table. Quickly, I mop it up with the sleeve of Vael's tunic, blinking back the burn of unshed tears.

Why now? Why, when I've finally found some measure of peace, do these memories resurface?

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Setting down the mug, I press my palms against my eyes, trying to block out the images. But they come anyway—flashes of the dungeon, the iron bars, the hungry eyes of demons as they selected women like cuts of meat at market. The captain's hand around my throat, squeezing just enough to remind me who controlled my breath, my life.

"It wasn't just a dream," I whisper to the empty kitchen. Something feels wrong—a prickling awareness at the base of my neck, an instinct honed through years of surviving as prey among predators. The nightmares aren't random. They're a warning.

But a warning of what?

I finish my tea, staring at the leaves gathered at the bottom of the mug. I wish they would form some pattern, give me some clue. But they're just leaves, soggy and formless.

I should tell Vael. The thought forms before I can stop it, and I immediately push it away. Tell him what? That I'm having bad dreams? That I have some formless dread with no evidence to back it up?

And what if voicing my fears somehow makes them real? What if I shatter this fragile peace we've built—this strange, unexpected sanctuary where I've found myself caring for a demon and his children?

No. Better to keep it to myself. Better to be strong, as I've always been.

I rinse my mug and return it to its shelf, moving quietly through the kitchen. At the

doorway, I pause, glancing back at the crimson light spilling through the window.

"It's just dreams," I tell myself firmly. "Nothing more."

But as I make my way back to my bedroom, the prickling sensation returns—the feeling of being watched, hunted. I quicken my pace, suddenly desperate for the protection of at least being near him, even as I tell myself I need no protection.

I slide under the covers, my heart still racing. I do everything I can to try and calm my heart.

But I don't sleep again tonight.

And the dread never leaves me.

23

VAEL

I lean against the doorframe, frozen in place by the sight before me. Trinity sits in the rocking chair by the window, cradling both twins against her chest. Moonlight catches in her hair, turning the brown waves into streams of liquid silver. Her voice—so often sharp with wit or defensive walls—now spills into the room like honey, sweet and flowing.

She doesn't know I'm here. Doesn't see me watching as she sings some human lullaby to my daughters, her lips curved in that rare, unguarded smile I've come to crave like a drug.

Liora's tiny fist clutches at Trinity's nightdress while Kaelin's eyes are already drooping, lulled by the gentle cadence of her mother's voice. Mother. The word still

catches in my throat. Trinity never wanted to be one—made that abundantly clear from the start—yet here she is, singing our daughters to sleep with such tenderness it makes my chest ache.

I should announce myself. Should clear my throat or step back or give her this private moment. Instead, I remain rooted to the spot, greedy for every second of this version of Trinity—the one without armor, without calculated moves.

Her song dips lower, the words becoming indistinct as she presses a kiss to each tiny forehead. Liora gives a contented sigh that seems impossibly adult for her small body.

"That's it," Trinity whispers, her voice barely carrying to where I stand. "Dream of beautiful things, my little loves."

The possessive makes something primitive stir in my chest. My little loves. Like they're hers. Like she might stay.

I must make some small sound—a shifting of weight, an intake of breath—because suddenly Trinity's head snaps up, those guarded green eyes finding mine in the darkness.

"How long have you been standing there?" Her walls slam back into place, her body tensing even as she cradles the twins protectively.

"Not long." The lie comes easily, though we both know better.

She rises with a dancer's grace, laying first Kaelin then Liora in their shared crib. Her hands linger on their bellies, ensuring they're settled before she turns to face me.

"Did you need something?" Professional. Distant. Nothing like the woman who had

been singing moments before.

I step into the room, keeping my movements slow, non-threatening. "I heard singing."

Her cheeks flush, visible even in the dim light. "Just an old lullaby from my village."

"It's beautiful." I move closer, stopping when I see her shoulders tighten. "You're good with them."

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Trinity shrugs, eyes darting to the exit I'm now partially blocking. "They make it easy. They're good babies."

"They're lucky to have you." I risk another step forward. She doesn't retreat but watches me with wary eyes.

"They have me until I leave," she reminds me, chin lifting slightly. "That was our deal."

I run a hand through my hair, frustration coiling in my gut. "Is that still what you want? To leave?"

A flicker of something—uncertainty, perhaps—crosses her face before she masters it. "It doesn't matter what I want. It's what we agreed to."

"Things change." My voice drops lower as I take another step. Now we're close enough that I can smell her—that intoxicating mix of nimond flowers and something uniquely Trinity. "People change."

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Demons don't change."

"I have." The admission costs me something—pride, perhaps, or the last shreds of my self-deception. "Since you. Since them."

Her green eyes widen slightly, flecks of gold catching in the moonlight. For a heartbeat, I think I see longing there—the same hunger that's been consuming me these past months.

"Vael..." Her voice catches. "Don't."

"Don't what?" I reach out, my fingers barely brushing her cheek. "Don't tell you that I see you? That I know there's more between us than a bargain?"

She flinches away from my touch as if burned. "There isn't. There can't be."

"Why?" I demand, the question harsher than I intended. Behind us, Kaelin stirs, and we both freeze until her breathing evens out again.

Trinity takes advantage of my distraction to step back, putting more distance between us. "Because I can't trust this. Any of it." She gestures between us. "I've survived by knowing exactly where I stand, and with you—" She breaks off, swallowing hard. "With you, I don't know anymore."

"You stand with me," I tell her, fighting the urge to close the distance she's created. "Beside me. Not beneath me, not as a possession. As..."

The word I want to say catches in my throat. It's too much, too soon. We're not ready.

"As what?" she challenges, arms crossing over her chest.

I exhale slowly. "As someone I care about. Someone who matters."

Her expression falters, vulnerability flashing across her features before she smooths it away. "Caring is dangerous."

"Yes," I agree quietly. "It is."

For a moment, we simply look at each other, the air between us charged with all the things we won't say. Then Trinity steps past me toward the door.

"Goodnight, Vael."

I watch her go, fighting every instinct that screams at me to follow, to make her understand. But I've pushed enough for one night, and Trinity—my fierce, fragile Trinity—needs time.

"Goodnight," I whisper, long after she's gone.

I don't sleep much that night. My mind keeps replaying Trinity's expression—that brief flash of vulnerability before her walls slammed back into place. By dawn, I've given up entirely, padding through the quiet house toward the nursery.

The soft morning light filters through the gossamer curtains, casting the room in a gentle glow. My daughters sleep peacefully in their shared crib, tiny chests rising and falling in perfect synchronicity. I lean over the edge, marveling at how such small creatures have completely unraveled my carefully ordered life.

"You two have turned me into someone I don't recognize," I murmur, gently tracing my finger along Liora's cheek. Her skin feels impossibly soft beneath my calloused touch. "I used to be feared across two worlds, you know."

As if sensing my presence, Kaelin's eyes flutter open—those striking red-amber orbs with green flecks that mirror my own but carry Trinity's intensity. She doesn't cry, just stares up at me with what looks suspiciously like judgment.

"Don't give me that look," I tell her seriously. "I'm perfectly capable of handling this."

She waves her tiny fists, unconvinced.

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"Fine, you've made your point." I carefully lift her from the crib, cradling her against my chest. Her weight is nothing in my arms, but the responsibility feels immense. "Let's let your sister sleep a bit longer, hmm?"

I settle into the rocking chair where Trinity sat last night, adjusting Kaelin so she can see my face. Her tiny brow furrows as she studies me intently.

"You get that look from your mother," I inform her. "That 'I don't believe your bullshit for a second' expression. She's perfected it."

Kaelin reaches up, her fingers finding my chin. I lean closer, letting her explore my face with curious hands. When those small fingers graze one of my horns, I hold perfectly still, afraid she might hurt herself on the sharp edge.

"Careful there, little warrior. Those are sharper than they look."

She makes a soft cooing sound, completely fearless. Of course my daughter wouldn't be afraid of demon horns—they're as much a part of her heritage as her human mother's stubborn spirit.

From the crib, Liora begins to stir. Her cries start soft but quickly grow more insistent. I rise with Kaelin secure against my shoulder and retrieve her sister with my free arm.

"There we go," I murmur, settling back into the chair with both twins. "The whole legion assembled."

Liora quiets immediately once she's nestled against me, those golden eyes blinking up sleepily. Where Kaelin is bold exploration, Liora is quiet observation, watching everything with those knowing eyes.

"You two couldn't be more different if you tried," I tell them, rocking gently. "Kaelin ready to take on the world, and Liora figuring out how it all works first."

Kaelin grabs at my thumb, her grip surprisingly strong.

"That's right," I chuckle. "You'll make a fine hunter someday. Maybe even better than your old man."

I never imagined this—sitting in a nursery at dawn, talking to my half-human daughters as if they understand every word. The bounty hunter of Aerasak, terror of criminals across two worlds, completely at the mercy of two tiny beings.

"Your mother thinks I can't change." I keep my voice soft, gentle. "That demons don't change. She might be right about most of my kind, but she doesn't understand what she's done to me."

Liora's eyes seem to widen at the mention of Trinity, her tiny head turning as if looking for her.

"She'll be here soon," I promise. "And she loves you both so much, even if she's scared to admit how much."

I shift them slightly, making sure both are comfortable against my chest. "Maybe you two can help me show her that she belongs here. That she doesn't have to leave when you're a bit older."

Kaelin makes a gurgling sound that I choose to interpret as agreement.

"Exactly. We're not forcing her to stay—that's the last thing I'd ever do. She's had enough of that in her life." I brush my lips against each tiny forehead. "But we can show her what she'd be missing if she goes."

The sound of soft footsteps in the hallway makes me pause. I don't look up when Trinity appears in the doorway, pretending I haven't noticed her presence. Let her see this moment without my awareness adding pressure.

"Look at that sunrise," I tell my daughters, nodding toward the window where Aerasak's crimson sky is blooming into morning. "Nothing like it in all the worlds. One day, I'll show you every corner of this planet. All the places worth seeing."

Kaelin grabs at my finger again and I let her capture it, smiling as her tiny hand barely encircles my thumb.

"Strong grip you've got there. Going to be trouble when you're older, I can already tell."

Liora, not to be outdone, reaches for my other hand. I shift to accommodate, letting both my daughters hold onto me as if I'm their anchor in this new world they're discovering.

I never expected to want to be that so much.

For all three of my girls.

24

TRINITY

Afragile peace settles over the house in the days that follow. Vael and I orbit each

other like cautious planets, close enough to feel the pull but never quite colliding. I catch him watching me with the twins sometimes, that strange intensity in his red-gold eyes making my skin prickle with awareness.

I'm singing softly to Liora this afternoon, bouncing her gently as she fusses. Kaelin sleeps in her crib, having exhausted herself with her morning theatrics. The house feels different with Vael gone—quieter, emptier somehow. He left at dawn for what he called "a simple collection," promising to return by nightfall.

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"Just you and me today, little one," I murmur against Liora's downy head. She looks up at me with those intelligent gold eyes, a tiny crease between her brows as if she's concerned about something. "Your father will be back soon enough."

The word "father" still feels strange on my tongue. Stranger still is how naturally Vael has taken to the role, his massive demon hands somehow perfectly capable of cradling our daughters with impossible gentleness.

Our daughters. When did I start thinking of them that way?

A sharp knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. Jackie must have gone to the market—she mentioned needing fresh dreelek for dinner. Liora squirms against my shoulder as I make my way downstairs, my bare feet silent against the polished floors.

"Coming," I call, adjusting Liora's position against my hip.

I swing the door open without thinking, without caution—a mistake I would never have made on Galmoleth. The sunlight silhouettes a tall figure, and for a heartbeat, I think it's Vael returning early.

Then the light shifts, and my blood freezes in my veins.

"Well, well, well." Captain Drez'kor's silky voice slides over me like oil on water. "My little runaway."

He stands on the threshold in full regalia—black armor gleaming in the sunlight, a

cape of deep crimson cascading from broad shoulders. His skin is darker than Vael's, a deep charcoal gray that makes his silver eyes even more unnerving. Unlike Vael's straight horns, the captain's curl like a ram's on either side of his head, inlaid with silver bands that catch the light.

Instinctively, I back away, clutching Liora closer to my chest. She whimpers, sensing my fear.

"What a touching domestic scene." Drez'kor invites himself in, boots echoing against the floor as he circles me like prey. "I've been looking for you for months, Trinity. Imagine my surprise when I discovered you'd been spirited away by none other than Vaelrix." His silver eyes narrow. "A bounty hunter taking something that doesn't belong to him. How... ironic."

"I don't belong to anyone," I manage, my voice steadier than I feel.

Drez'kor laughs, the sound like shattering glass. "Of course you do. You belonged to Asmodeus, and by extension, to me." His gaze drops to Liora, who's begun to fuss in earnest. "And what's this? A little half-breed abomination?"

My arms tighten around my daughter. "Don't come any closer."

He ignores my warning, stepping forward to flick one finger against Liora's cheek. She wails, the sound piercing through my panic and igniting something fiercer.

"Get your hands off my child." The words emerge in a snarl I barely recognize as my own.

"Your child?" Drez'kor's eyebrows rise, his smile turning cruel. "How sweet. You've gone native." He glances around the house. "Where's the other one? There should be two, according to my sources."

My heart stops. "What sources?"

"Information is a commodity, Trinity. Surely you haven't forgotten that." He studies my face. "You were always clever about collecting it yourself. Used it to improve your position quite effectively."

From upstairs, Kaelin begins to cry, as if sensing her sister's distress. Drez'kor's eyes shift toward the sound, a predatory interest flickering across his features.

"Ah, there she is." He makes a move toward the stairs, and I step in front of him without thinking.

"Don't."

He pauses, amusement dancing in those metallic eyes. "Are you giving me orders, human?"

"I'm asking you to leave." I try to keep my voice steady, but Liora's escalating cries and Kaelin's distant wailing make it hard to focus. "Vael will be back any moment."

"Will he now?" Drez'kor leans closer, his breath hot against my cheek. "My sources indicate he's at least three hours away. Plenty of time for us to... reconnect." His eyes drop to Liora again. "And to handle that pesky problem too."

My blood turns to ice. "What do you mean?"

He shrugs, a casual gesture that somehow conveys more menace than a drawn weapon. "Half-breeds are messy complications. I'd be doing Vaelrix a favor, really. And then you and I can return to Galmoleth, where you belong."

"I'd rather die." The words escape before I can stop them.

Drez'kor laughs again, reaching out to twirl a strand of my hair around his finger. "So dramatic. You know, I always appreciated your survival instinct, Trinity. The way you'd do anything—and anyone—to stay alive." His hand drops to my throat, not squeezing, just resting there as a reminder of how easily he could. "Where has that instinct gone? Surely these little monsters haven't made you forget who and what you are?"

Liora's cries have turned to hiccuping sobs against my chest, her tiny body trembling. Upstairs, Kaelin continues to scream, and I'm torn between the child in my arms and the one I can't reach.

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"They're my daughters," I say, each word deliberate as I stare directly into those silver eyes. "And you're not going to touch them."

"Your daughters?" The captain's smile widens, revealing teeth too sharp for comfort. "How quaint. And here I thought you were just playing house until something better came along." He gestures around the room. "Though I must say, Vaelrix has better taste than I expected. This is quite the gilded cage he's built for you."

I take another step back, calculating the distance to the kitchen, wondering if I can reach the knives there before he catches me. "It's not a cage."

"No?" His head tilts, studying me like an interesting specimen. "Then why haven't you left yet? The infamous survivor, suddenly content with domesticity?" He laughs. "Don't tell me you've developed feelings for your demon captor?"

The accusation hits too close to the confusion swirling inside me. "What I feel doesn't concern you."

"On the contrary, it concerns me greatly." He takes another step forward, forcing me back against the wall. "Because I've come to claim what Asmodeus promised me."

I clutch Liora closer as she whimpers against my chest. "They aren't part of this. At least wait for their father to get home. Then I can go with you." My stomach twists at the thought, but it's the best bet I have right now.

Drez'kor's laugh is like broken glass. "How charming. The human pet thinks she understands her master." He gestures toward the door. "Come back with me now, and

I'll be merciful. We had a good arrangement before, didn't we? You were clever, useful."

Liora's cries grow louder, piercing through my racing thoughts. Upstairs, Kaelin continues wailing, the sound tearing at me like physical pain.

"Let me at least check on my other daughter," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Then we can talk."

Something like triumph flashes in his silver eyes. He thinks I'm considering his offer.

"Of course." He steps back with exaggerated courtesy. "Family obligations first."

I move quickly to the small sitting room off the main hall where we've placed a second crib for daytime naps. Liora's tiny body trembles against mine as I lower her into it, brushing a finger along her tear-streaked cheek.

"It's okay, little one," I whisper, though nothing is okay. "Stay quiet for mama."

I turn to find Drez'kor blocking the doorway, watching with cold amusement.

"Touching," he says. "Now, shall we discuss terms? I'm thinking we return to our previous arrangement, with a few...adjustments. You've grown more valuable, knowing Vaelrix's business."

I move past him, deliberately walking toward the kitchen—away from both girls. "There's nothing to discuss. I'm not going anywhere with you."

He follows, his footsteps heavy and deliberate. "Don't be difficult, Trinity. You know how that ends."

In the kitchen, I keep the large center island between us, my eyes tracking his movements. "I'm not who I was on Galmoeth."

"No?" His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "You're not the clever little human who survived by selling herself to the highest bidder? Not the girl who traded information and favors to climb out of the dungeons?"

"I did what I had to do to survive," I say, fingers sliding along the counter's edge, inching toward the knife block. "And to protect the other girls."

"Noble." He spits the word like a curse. "And now you're protecting what? Half-breed spawn who'll never be accepted anywhere?" He moves suddenly, rounding the island faster than I can react. His hand closes around my arm, yanking me against him. "Stop playing games. Your demon isn't coming home to save you."

Something in me snaps at his words—a dam breaking loose. I bring my knee up hard between his legs, catching him by surprise.

He grunts, loosening his grip just enough for me to twist away. I grab the first thing my hand finds—a heavy cast iron pan from the drying rack—and swing it with all my strength.

It connects with the side of his head with a satisfying crack. Drez'kor staggers back, momentarily stunned.

"You little bitch," he snarls, a trickle of dark blood running from his temple down his gray skin.

"Get out of my house," I growl, holding the pan like a shield. "You're not taking me anywhere, and you're not touching my children."

He lunges, faster than I expect, knocking the pan from my grip. It clatters to the floor as he slams me against the wall, his forearm pressing against my throat.

"I liked you better when you were compliant," he hisses, his breath hot on my face.

"What happened to the pragmatic survivor who knew when to submit?"

I claw at his arm, gasping for air. "She found something worth fighting for."

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Using all my strength, I bring my elbow down on his forearm while simultaneously driving my knee up again. His grip loosens just enough for me to duck under his arm. I scramble across the kitchen, grabbing a knife from the block.

"Stay back," I warn, the blade steady in my hand.

Drez'kor touches his bleeding temple, looking at the blood on his fingertips with disbelief that quickly morphs into rage. "You'll regret that." He advances slowly, calculated. "Put that down before you hurt yourself."

"I'm not the one who's going to get hurt." I keep the knife between us, backing toward the door. If I can just get to the twins, barricade us somewhere...

He moves with terrible speed, catching my wrist and twisting until pain shoots up my arm. The knife falls from my numb fingers as he forces me back against the counter, his weight pinning me.

"I've always admired your spirit," he says, one hand wrapping around my throat. "But this is becoming tiresome."

I struggle wildly, clawing, kicking, fighting with a ferocity I never knew I possessed. My nails rake down his face, drawing blood from four parallel scratches.

He curses, tightening his grip. "Enough!"

Spots dance at the edges of my vision as his fingers cut off my air. Panic surges through me, not for myself but for my daughters. Who will protect them if I can't?

"Vael," I choke out, though I know he can't hear me. The realization that he might return to find me gone and our children alone—or worse—sends a fresh wave of desperation through me.

With the last of my strength, I reach behind me, fingers scrabbling against the counter until they close around a small glass jar. I smash it against the side of Drez'kor's head with every ounce of force I can muster.

He roars in pain, loosening his hold just enough for me to gulp in a precious breath. But his recovery is quick, and his expression turns murderous as he pins me more securely, one hand returning to my throat.

"I was going to be reasonable," he growls, "but now I think I'll just take what I want and leave Vaelrix a message he won't forget."

My vision dims as his grip tightens again. Is this how it ends? After everything I've survived, will my daughters grow up never knowing how fiercely I fought for them? Will Vael come home to find me gone—or worse?

The thought of Vael finding my broken body sends a strange, desperate ache through me. He has to make it home in time. He has to.

25

VAEL

Iknew something was wrong the moment I reached the outskirts of Krath. The informant I was supposed to meet never showed—unusual for someone who'd built a reputation on reliability. The message that had drawn me here suddenly felt wrong, like a false note in a familiar song.

"Shit." The word escapes in a cloud of steam as I scan the empty meeting point one last time.

My instincts prickle, the same instincts that have kept me alive for thirty-seven years. The job is a setup. But why lure me away from?—

Trinity.

Her name flashes through my mind like lightning, followed immediately by the twins. I don't waste another second, sprinting back to where I'd tethered my zarryn. The silver-coated beast senses my urgency, pawing nervously at the ground as I approach.

"Home," I growl, vaulting onto its back. "Fast."

The creature needs no further encouragement, taking off at a gallop that would throw most riders. My mind races ahead of us, playing through scenarios, each worse than the last. Trinity alone with the twins, vulnerable. Jackie is there, but what good is one human woman against—against what?

Against who?

A cold certainty settles in my gut. There's only one demon with both motive and means to discover Trinity's whereabouts. The captain from Galmoleth, the one who'd had his greedy eyes on her when I first saw her. The one who'd been promised her by Asmodeus.

The zarryn's muscles bunch and stretch beneath me as I urge him faster, cutting through forests instead of following the main paths. Branches whip past, slashing at my face and arms. I barely notice, consumed by a rage and fear unlike anything I've ever felt.

If he touches her—if he touches my children?—

The thought doesn't need completing. The zarryn seems to respond to my desperation, pushing itself beyond its limits. Foam flecks its silver coat, but I can't slow down. Can't take the chance.

Luckily, I didn't fall for his trap, didn't search the area for whatever would leave me further away I'm sure. Instead, I'm still close enough to my home that with this speed, I'll be there in a matter of minutes. When my house finally comes into view, the zarryn is trembling with exhaustion, but I feel nothing but cold focus.

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Something is wrong. The front door stands open, and the air carries sounds that turn my blood to ice—the twins crying, and beneath that, a struggle.

I leap from the zarryn's back before it fully stops, hitting the ground running. My boot kicks the door wider as I burst in, following the sounds to the kitchen.

What I see sends a surge of killing rage through me.

Trinity pinned against the counter, a familiar gray hand squeezing her throat. Her face turning purple, hands clawing desperately at her attacker's arm. Glass shards on the floor, blood on both of them. The twins' cries echo from different parts of the house, terrified and unanswered.

Captain Drez'kor doesn't even hear me enter. His focus is entirely on Trinity, on watching the light fade from her eyes.

I cross the kitchen in two strides, seizing him by the back of his ornate armor and ripping him away from her with such force that he crashes into the opposite wall. Trinity collapses, gasping and clutching her throat, but her eyes find mine immediately.

"The twins," she chokes out.

Drez'kor recovers quickly, his silver eyes widening in recognition, then narrowing with hate. "Vaelrix. The thief returns."

I position myself between him and Trinity, every muscle coiled for violence. "You're

in my house."

He straightens, wiping blood from his temple where Trinity clearly landed a blow. "Taking back what belongs to me. Asmodeus promised her to me before you stole her."

"She belongs to no one." My voice drops to a register that makes the air vibrate. "Least of all you."

Trinity pushes herself up. "Vael, I'm okay. The girls?—"

"Check on them," I tell her, never taking my eyes off the captain. "I'll handle this."

Drez'kor's lips curve in a mocking smile. "Handle me? Bold words from a half-breed bounty hunter."

Trinity slips past me, pausing just long enough to squeeze my arm. Her touch burns through me, fueling the rage already threatening to consume me entirely.

"Vael," she whispers, "kill him."

She doesn't need to ask twice.

The moment she's clear of the kitchen, I lunge. Drez'kor is ready, meeting me halfway. We crash together like thunder, demon strength against demon strength. He's a captain, trained in combat, but I'm a hunter with centuries of tracking and killing the most dangerous prey across three worlds.

His fist connects with my jaw. I taste blood but feel no pain, only cold purpose. I drive my knee into his stomach, following with an elbow to his face when he doubles over. His nose shatters with a satisfying crunch.

He recovers faster than I expect, drawing a hidden blade from his boot. The steel flashes as he slashes, opening a line of fire across my chest.

"I'll kill you," he snarls, "and then I'll take your human and your abominations."

Something in me snaps at his words. The cold rage turns white-hot, burning away all restraint. I grab his wrist mid-slash, twisting until bones crack. The knife clatters to the floor, and I kick it away.

Trinity appears in the doorway, both twins clutched to her chest. "Vael!"

The momentary distraction costs me. Drez'kor drives his head forward, horns first, catching me in the shoulder. Pain explodes through me, but it only feeds the rage.

He uses the moment to break free, shoving me back and bolting for the door. He's fast—but I'm faster, caught in the grip of something primal and unstoppable.

"Go," Trinity shouts after me as the captain flees. "I'm okay. Go get him!"

I hesitate for just a heartbeat, torn between staying to protect them and hunting down the threat. Trinity's eyes meet mine, fierce despite the bruises blooming on her throat.

"End this," she says. "Make sure he never comes back."

I'm moving before she finishes speaking, bursting through the door in pursuit. Drez'kor has already mounted a trizon—not as fast as my zarryn, but the creature's vicious nature makes it dangerous.

The chase begins.

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He heads for the dense forest, clearly hoping to lose me among the trees. A mistake. The forest is my domain, has been since childhood. I follow not just his tracks but his scent, his fear a tangible marker in the air.

I catch glimpses of him between trees, his crimson cape snapping behind him. The trizon snarls as it runs, sensing its master's desperation.

When I'm close enough, I launch myself from the zarryn's back, tackling him from his mount. We crash through underbrush, rolling down a small embankment until we hit the rocky shore of a stream.

He fights like a cornered animal, all technique abandoned for desperate brutality. His horns catch me again, gouging deep into my thigh. I barely feel it, lost in the singular purpose of destroying the demon who threatened my family. My hands close around his throat, mirroring what he did to Trinity. His silver eyes bulge as I squeeze.

"You don't understand," he gasps, clawing at my arms. "The half-breeds—dangerous?—"

I lean closer, watching terror bloom in his eyes. "Those 'half-breeds' are my daughters."

His struggles intensify. He manages to free one hand enough to reach a second hidden blade, this one strapped to his forearm. The metal pierces my side, sliding between ribs with practiced precision.

Pain explodes through me, but instead of weakening my grip, it only sharpens my

focus. I slam his head against the rocky ground once, twice, until blood darkens the water around us.

"For touching her," I growl, bringing my fist down on his face. Bones crunch beneath my knuckles. "For threatening my children." Another blow, harder. His struggles weaken. "For entering my home."

The captain's silver eyes dim as I wrap my hands around his throat again, squeezing with every ounce of strength I possess. His legs kick feebly beneath me, hands fluttering uselessly at my wrists.

"No one," I tell him, watching the light fade from his eyes, "touches what's mine."

The moment his body goes limp, I know it's not enough. With methodical precision, I draw the knife he used from my side. His eyes flutter open one last time, realization dawning a moment before I drive the blade through his throat, severing his spine.

The sound of steel grinding against bone is the last thing he hears.

I remain kneeling in the bloodied water, chest heaving, watching to make sure he doesn't move again. Only when I'm certain he's dead do I rise, gathering his body. Evidence cannot remain—not of a captain's death.

His blood mingles with mine as I haul him deeper into the forest, to a place where scavengers will ensure nothing recognizable remains. Only when the body is hidden do I allow myself to acknowledge my wounds, the torn flesh and flowing blood.

None of it matters. Only one thought drives me now: getting back to Trinity and our daughters.

The threat has ended. The captain will never touch my family again.

I've never been more satisfied to have failed at a bounty before.

The ride back is a blur. All I can think about is my family. I stumble through the door of my home, a strange heaviness settling in my bones that has nothing to do with blood loss.

The captain's body is hidden deep in the forest, but his attempt to take what's mine remains fresh in my mind. My wounds scream with every movement—the gouge in my thigh, the puncture between my ribs, the cuts and bruises of combat—yet they're distant, secondary concerns.

The house is quiet now. Too quiet after the chaos I left behind.

"Trinity?" My voice emerges as a rasp, echoing through the hallway.

No answer comes, and for a moment, panic claws at my throat. What if there were others? What if while I was dealing with the captain, someone else?—

Then I hear it. A soft humming from the nursery, a melody I've heard Trinity sing to the twins when she thinks no one is listening. My feet carry me there before I can think, every step leaving crimson prints on the floor.

I pause at the doorway, struck immobile by the sight before me.

Trinity sits in the rocking chair, both twins cradled against her chest. Her throat bears angry purple bruises in the shape of fingertips. A cut above her eyebrow has bled down the side of her face. She looks exhausted, battle-worn—and yet somehow more beautiful than I've ever seen her.

The twins are fussing, tiny faces red and scrunched from crying, little fists waving in distress. Trinity whispers to them, her voice hoarse from being choked but gentle as

she tries to soothe them.

"It's okay now. We're safe. Your father made sure of it."

Something in my chest cracks open at her words. A strange pressure builds behind my eyes, and I realize with shock that I'm fighting back tears. Me. A demon bounty hunter who's killed more beings than I can count, suddenly undone by the sight of this human woman calling me "dad" to our children.

Trinity looks up, sensing my presence. Relief floods her face, followed immediately by concern as she takes in my bloodied state.

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"Vael," she breathes.

My name on her lips shatters whatever remains of my composure. I cross the room in three strides and drop to my knees before her, uncaring of the pain that shoots through my injured leg. My arms encircle all three of them—Trinity and our daughters—and I press my forehead against Trinity's shoulder.

"He's dead," I manage, voice thick with emotion I've never allowed myself to feel. "He'll never touch you again. Never threaten our family."

Trinity shifts, balancing the twins with one arm to free her other hand. Her fingers thread through my hair, coming away sticky with blood.

"You're hurt."

"Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." Her voice cracks on the last word.

I lift my head to look at her, really look at her. The green eyes that first captured my attention now swim with unshed tears. Her bottom lip trembles slightly.

"I thought—" She swallows hard. "When he grabbed me, all I could think was that you weren't here, and if he killed me, the girls would be alone."

A growl rumbles deep in my chest. "I should have been here."

"No." Trinity's hand cups my cheek, forcing me to meet her gaze. "He would have ambushed you first if you'd been home. This way, you saved us."

Kaelin hiccups and reaches a small hand toward me. Without thinking, I offer my finger, and she wraps her tiny fist around it. Something powerful and primitive surges through me at the contact.

"I almost lost you," I whisper, the admission torn from somewhere deep and vulnerable I didn't know existed. "All of you."

Trinity's eyes soften. "But you didn't. We're here. We're safe."

Liora begins to fuss more insistently, her little face turning toward Trinity's chest. Hunger, most likely. The practicality of the moment—these tiny beings need feeding, need protection, need everything—centers me in a strange way.

"Let me clean up and help you with them." I start to rise, wincing as my injuries protest.

She just nods, and I stare at them, trying to really remember that my family, the people I love most, my girls, are safe. They are here.

And I can't let any of them go.

26

TRINITY

I can't stop trembling, hours after everything happened. The moment keeps replaying in my head—Drez'kor's hands around my throat, the twins screaming, the sheer terror that my daughters would be left motherless or worse. Then Vael bursting through the

door like vengeance personified, his eyes blazing with a fury I've never witnessed before.

After bathing the girls and tending to Vael's wounds—which he stubbornly insisted were "nothing" despite the deep gash in his side—exhaustion settles into my bones. Yet sleep remains elusive, my nerves too raw, too alert.

The twins, miraculously, drift off easily after their feeding. I gently place Kaelin next to her sister in their cradle, brushing my fingers against their impossibly soft cheeks.

"Your father saved us today," I whisper, the words catching in my bruised throat.

Their father. The demon who went hunting today to protect what's his. I touch the tender skin around my neck, wincing at the pain. Drez'kor's hands had been like iron bands crushing my windpipe. If Vael hadn't returned when he did...

A soft knock draws my attention to the doorway where Vael stands, freshly bathed, his torso wrapped in bandages. Despite his injuries, he looks powerful, vigilant—a predator still on alert.

"They're asleep?" His voice is low, gravelly from the day's exertion.

I nod, careful not to disturb the peaceful twins. "Finally."

He crosses to the cradle, gazing down at our daughters with an expression that makes my chest tighten. Tenderness and ferocity mingled together—the look of a father who would tear apart worlds to keep his children safe.

"Come with me." He extends his hand, those red-gold eyes fixed on mine. "To my room."

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My pulse quickens. We haven't done that since I gave birth. "Vael, I'm exhausted, and you're injured?—"

"Not for that." His mouth quirks slightly. "Just...come."

Something in his tone makes refusal impossible. I place a gentle kiss on each twin's forehead before taking his outstretched hand, allowing him to lead me from the nursery. His fingers entwine with mine, warm and secure.

Vael's bedroom is a place I've glimpsed but never entered—a private domain with massive windows facing the forest, dominated by an enormous bed draped in midnight-colored linens. Weapons mounted on the walls catch the lamplight, gleaming dangerously. It suits him, this room—dark, powerful, yet unexpectedly comfortable.

He guides me to sit on the edge of his bed, then paces before me, a caged predator wrestling with himself. The bandage around his ribs shows a faint pink stain, but he moves as if the wound is irrelevant.

"Trinity." My name sounds different when he says it, weighted with meaning I can't fully decipher. He stops pacing, turns to face me. "Today made something clear that I can no longer ignore."

I swallow, wincing at the pain in my throat. "What's that?"

"I can't let you go."

The words hang between us, vibrating with intensity. He drops to one knee before me, bringing our faces level, his hands resting on my thighs. Heat radiates through the thin fabric of my nightdress.

"I've been lying—to myself, to you." His eyes burn into mine, pupils narrowed to slits with emotion. "This was never just about an heir."

My breath catches. "What was it about, then?"

"You." He reaches up, gently tracing the bruises on my neck. "From the moment I saw you in that room on Galmoleth, something in me recognized something in you. Like recognizing a path I was always meant to walk."

I try to look away, but his hand cups my cheek, keeping my gaze locked with his.

"I told myself it was about continuing my line, about appeasing my mother, about having someone to inherit what I've built. But those were excuses." He leans closer, his breath warm against my lips. "The truth is simpler and far more terrifying: I wanted you. Just you."

My heart pounds so hard I'm certain he can hear it. "Vael?—"

"Let me finish." His thumb brushes my bottom lip. "When I saw him touching you today, when I heard our daughters crying... I've never known fear like that. Not in all my years hunting the most dangerous creatures across three worlds."

A tear slips down my cheek before I can stop it. His thumb catches it, gentle despite the strength I know those hands possess.

"It stopped being about an heir long ago, Trinity. Maybe it never was." His voice drops lower, rougher. "I've been afraid to admit how deeply I want you. Not just in

my bed—though gods know I want that too—but in my life. By my side. I've always felt so drawn to you, and I would do anything for you. I know that. But the one thing I just can't do is let you go."

I stare at him, this demon whose cold exterior has cracked open to reveal something I never expected to find—vulnerability.

"I know our arrangement was temporary," he continues. "I know I promised you freedom after the birth. But I'm asking—begging, if I must—for you to stay."

His words wash over me like an impossible wave, leaving me trembling in their wake. This wasn't supposed to happen. Demons don't fall for humans. Bounty hunters don't beg. And I—I don't get chosen. Not when there's nothing left to give.

"You want me to stay?" My voice cracks, the bruises on my throat making each word painful. "As what? The mother of your children? Your personal bedwarmer?"

Vael's jaw tightens, those red-gold eyes flaring with frustration. "As you, Trinity. Just you. I have always been willing to take whatever you would give me as long as I could have you."

I stand abruptly, breaking away from his touch because it's too much—too gentle, too real. I pace to the window where Aerasak's crimson sky bleeds into the horizon. The strange metallic flora of his garden catches moonlight like scattered coins.

"I don't understand what that means," I whisper, pressing my palm against the cool glass. "Nobody just wants me."

"I do." Two words, spoken with such conviction that I have to close my eyes against them.

"You don't even know me." I turn to face him, wrapping my arms around myself. "You know the woman who bartered her way through survival. The woman who traded her body for safety. The woman who agreed to bear your children for freedom."

He rises to his full height, towering and powerful, yet somehow vulnerable in this moment. "I know the woman who protected other girls in those dungeons. Who challenges me at every turn. Who looks at our daughters like they're miracles, despite never wanting children."

A laugh escapes me, bitter and defensive. "That's what I do, Vael. I adapt. I survive. I figure out what people want and become it."

"And what do I want?" He takes a step toward me, careful, as if approaching a wild animal. "Tell me what mask you've been wearing for me."

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The question slams into me like a physical blow. I open my mouth to respond with something cutting, something that will keep this wall between us intact, but nothing comes. What mask have I been wearing for him? The realization hits me with stunning clarity—none.

"I don't know how to do this," I admit, my voice barely audible. "I don't know how to be... loved. I only know how to be useful." My fingers drift unconsciously to my throat, to the evidence of how quickly usefulness can expire. "My entire life, I've been something to be used and discarded. Even before the demons came, in my village, I was just the orphan girl passed from home to home."

Vael crosses the room in two strides, his hands cupping my face with devastating gentleness. "You don't have to be useful to be worthy, Trinity. Never with me."

Something breaks inside me then—a dam holding back years of carefully controlled emotions. Tears spill down my cheeks, hot and unstoppable.

"I never believed anyone would choose me for me," I confess, the words tearing from somewhere raw and hidden. "Not for what I could offer or do or be. Just... me."

His thumbs brush away my tears. "I choose you. I choose this stubborn, fierce, impossible human who terrifies and fascinates me in equal measure."

"Why?" The question emerges broken and small.

"Because you make me feel alive." He presses his forehead to mine. "Because when I'm with you, I'm not just a weapon or a bloodline or a demon. I'm just Vael."

I clutch at his arms, feeling the solid strength beneath my fingers. "I'm scared, Vael. I've never had anything to lose before. Now I have the twins, and I have..." I take a shuddering breath. "I have you. And it terrifies me how much I want to keep you all."

His eyes widen slightly. "Trinity?—"

"I don't want to go," I rush out before courage deserts me. "I never wanted to leave the girls. And somewhere along the way, I stopped wanting to leave you too." I swallow hard, meeting his gaze directly. I feel like I'm being gutted as the last of my walls are ripped away. "I love you. And I have no idea what to do with that."

Vael goes utterly still, as if I've spoken words in some forbidden language. Then his face transforms—the hard lines softening, those predator eyes warming to molten gold.

"Say it again," he whispers.

I slide my hands up to frame his face, feeling the heat of his skin beneath my palms. "I love you, Vael. Not because you saved me, or gave me children, or offered me protection. Just... you."

He pulls me close, his head tipping forward to touch mine. "Trinity, I have loved you from the second you stormed up to me at that ball and yelled at me. I knew then what I couldn't admit. I love you."

And even though I am physically and emotionally exhausted, his words send a wave of warmth through me. I never thought I could let go with a male, never thought I could trust one—especially not fall in love.

Yet I have.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

27

VAEL

The moment Trinity's confession leaves her lips, something inside me breaks open. All the barriers I've built, all the distance I've maintained over decades of isolation—gone in an instant. I pull her against me, mindful of my injured side but desperate to feel her warmth.

"I love you," I say again, the words strange yet perfect on my tongue. I've never said them to anyone before her. "I fucking love you."

I brush my lips against hers, tentative at first—giving her a chance to pull away. When she doesn't, when she instead presses closer, I deepen the kiss, one hand cradling her head while the other splays across her back.

This isn't our first kiss, but it feels like it. Everything before was a shadow of this—an approximation. This kiss contains no calculation, no ulterior motives, no boundaries. Just Trinity and me, finally honest with each other.

Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging me closer as her tongue slides against mine. The small moan that escapes her vibrates through me, igniting a fire that's always simmered between us. But this is different from the raw hunger we've shared before. This burns deeper, hotter, more consuming.

"Vael," she whispers against my mouth, her voice still rough from her injuries. The sound of those bruises on her throat makes rage flare within me again, but I push it down. That bastard is dead. Trinity is here, safe in my arms.

I trail my fingers over her neck with a feather-light touch, following the marks his hands left on her perfect skin. "I will never let anyone hurt you again," I vow, pressing the gentlest kisses to each bruise. "Never. You're mine to protect now."

Her hands slide up my chest, careful around the bandaged wound. "And you're mine," she says, those green eyes fixed on me with an intensity that steals my breath. "All mine."

The possessiveness in her voice makes my cock throb painfully against the confines of my pants. I've wanted Trinity from the moment I saw her, taken her body in countless ways since bringing her home. But I've never had all of her—not her heart, not her soul.

I lift her in one fluid motion, ignoring the twinge in my side as I carry her to my bed. Our bed, now. I lay her down reverently, watching as her hair fans across my pillows like spilled ink.

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"You have no idea how long I've wanted you here," I murmur, crawling over her, careful to keep my weight off her. "In my bed. In my life. Mine."

She reaches up, tracing the curve of my horn with delicate fingers. "Show me," she challenges, that familiar spark of defiance in her eyes that has always driven me wild.

I growl, low in my throat, and capture her mouth again. My hands slide down her sides, feeling the curves that have changed subtly since giving birth to our daughters. I savor every inch of her, mapping her body with my touch as if discovering it for the first time.

Her nightdress is a flimsy barrier between us, and I push it up slowly, exposing her inch by taunting inch. When her breasts come into view, fuller now from nursing, I groan with appreciation.

"So fucking beautiful," I murmur, lowering my mouth to take one sensitive nipple between my lips. She gasps, back arching as I circle it with my tongue.

"Careful," she breathes, threading her fingers through my hair. "They're sensitive."

I smile against her skin. "I know exactly how sensitive," I promise, gentling my touch but not relenting. I've learned every reaction of her body over our months together, memorized each gasp and moan like a favorite melody.

Trinity's hands are busy too, pushing at my sleep pants with impatience. I chuckle, helping her shove them down before kicking them away entirely.

"Need something?" I tease, nipping at her collarbone.

"You," she answers simply, all pretense gone. "Just you, Vael."

I pause, struck by the naked honesty in her voice. In all our couplings—frantic, passionate, calculated for conception, or simply to satisfy mutual hunger—there's always been a part of her held back. Until now.

"You have me," I promise, sliding her nightdress off completely and tossing it aside. "Every fucking part of me."

I kiss my way down her body, lingering at the places I know drive her wild—the hollow of her throat, the undersides of her breasts, the soft curve of her hip. When I reach the apex of her thighs, I look up to find her watching me, lips parted, eyes dark with desire.

"I'm going to taste you first," I tell her, spreading her legs wider. "Going to make you come on my tongue before I fill you up."

A flush spreads across her chest, up her neck to her cheeks. "Vael," she whispers, half protest, half plea.

I position myself between her thighs, inhaling her scent deeply before dragging my tongue through her folds in one long, deliberate stroke. She's already wet for me, her taste addictive as ever.

"Fuck, Trinity," I groan against her sensitive flesh. "I could live between your thighs."

She laughs, the sound transforming into a moan as I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue. Her hands find my horns, using them to guide my movements in a way that

makes my cock throb painfully against the mattress.

I work her with my mouth, adding fingers when she begins to rock against me frantically. Curling them inside her, I find that spot that makes her thighs tremble around my head.

"That's it," I encourage, watching her face contort with pleasure. "Let go for me, Trinity. Let me see you."

Her climax hits with stunning intensity—back bowing, thighs clamping around my head, my name a broken cry on her lips. I work her through it, gentling my touch as the aftershocks ripple through her body.

When she tugs at my horns, urging me upward, I comply, crawling back up her body to hover over her. The look in her eyes—soft, open, trusting—nearly undoes me.

"I need you," she whispers, reaching between us to guide me to her entrance. "Inside me. Please."

I enter her slowly, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. It's been weeks since her body healed from childbirth, but I'm still careful, still reverent with what she's giving me.

When I'm fully seated inside her, I pause, overwhelmed by the sensation—not just the physical pleasure, but the knowledge that this is different. This is Trinity, all of her, giving herself to me completely.

"I love you," I say again, the words coming easier now. The way Trinity's eyes shine up at me, full of wonder and vulnerability, makes my chest tighten with emotions I've never allowed myself to feel.

"I love you too," she whispers, her hands finding my face, fingers tracing the strong lines of my jaw. "I never thought I could—never thought anyone would?—"

I silence her with a kiss, unable to bear the pain in her voice. I know what she means. Trinity never thought she could love someone like me—a demon who bought her for breeding. And I never thought anyone would love me for anything beyond my status or strength.

I begin to move inside her, slowly at first, savoring each drag and thrust. Her body welcomes me, wet heat gripping my cock in the most exquisite way. But it's the openness in her eyes that truly undoes me—the way she holds my gaze without barriers, without calculation.

"You're everything," I murmur, dropping my forehead to hers as my hips find a rhythm. "Fucking everything to me."

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Trinity wraps her legs around my waist, changing the angle so I slide deeper. We both groan at the sensation. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, mindful of my injury but desperate to hold me close.

"Don't stop," she pants against my mouth. "Please don't ever stop."

I growl, picking up pace as her words fuel the fire inside me. "Not stopping. Not ever." Each thrust punctuates my promise. I brace one hand beside her head, the other sliding beneath her hips to lift her slightly, letting me hit that spot inside that makes her walls clench around me.

When she tosses her head back, exposing her bruised throat, I can't help but lower my mouth to it—not to mark her further, but to heal with gentle kisses what that bastard tried to take from her.

"Mine," I whisper against her pulse point, feeling it race beneath my lips. "Only mine to touch. Only mine to please."

"Yes," she agrees, her voice breaking on a particularly deep thrust. "Yours. Always yours."

Her hands slide down my back, nails digging in just enough to send shivers up my spine. The slight pain mixes with pleasure, heightening everything. I'm drowning in her—her scent, her sounds, the way her body trembles beneath mine.

I shift my weight, allowing me to slide a hand between our bodies. When my fingers find her clit, circling it with practiced precision, Trinity cries out, her back arching.

"That's it," I encourage, maintaining the rhythm of my hips while working her with my fingers. "Let me feel you come around my cock."

Her eyes flutter closed as tension builds in her body. I can feel it in the way her thighs tighten around me, the way her breath comes in shorter gasps.

"Look at me," I demand softly. When those green eyes open, hazy with desire but locked on mine, I nearly lose myself. "I want to see you when you come. Want to watch what I do to you."

Trinity's lips part on a silent cry as pleasure overtakes her. Her inner walls pulse around me, her body shuddering beneath mine. The sight of her—completely unguarded, completely mine—pushes me toward the edge.

"Fuck, Trinity," I groan, my rhythm faltering as I fight to hold back. "You feel so goddamn good."

She cups my face, pulling me down for a kiss that's both tender and desperate. "Come with me," she whispers against my lips. "Let go, Vael. I've got you."

Her words break something loose inside me. With a final thrust, I bury myself deep inside her and let go, my release tearing through me with an intensity that makes my vision blur. I growl her name against her throat as pleasure pulses through my body.

For long moments, we remain joined, our hearts racing against each other, our breath mingling in the small space between our mouths. I'm careful not to crush her with my weight, but I can't bear to separate from her yet.

When I finally find the strength to move, I roll to my side, bringing Trinity with me. She nestles against my chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns through the light sheen of sweat on my skin.

"Trinity," I say, tilting her chin up so I can see her face. This moment feels monumental, like the world has shifted beneath us. "I want you to be my mate."

Her eyes widen slightly.

"Not because of our arrangement," I continue, needing her to understand. "Not for the twins. I want you to bemymate. I want to wake up to your smart mouth every morning. I want to argue with you and make up with you and build a life with you. Regardless of everything else, I want you. Forever."

She stares at me, those expressive eyes filling with tears.

"I never thought—" She stops, swallows hard. "I spent so long trying not to feel anything. Trying to be what men wanted without giving anything real of myself. And then the twins came and you—" Her voice breaks. "You showed me what family could be."

I brush a tear from her cheek with my thumb. "Is that a yes?" I ask, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Trinity smiles, and it's like watching the sun rise over Aerasak's mountains. "Yes," she says, pressing her palm to my chest, right over my heart. "I love being their mother in a way I never expected. I love being here with you. I don't want to lose this—lose you."

I pull her closer, burying my face in her hair to hide the emotion threatening to overwhelm me. "You won't," I promise fiercely. "You're stuck with me now, little human. For life."

She laughs softly, the sound vibrating against my chest. "Good," she whispers. "Because I love you, you stubborn demon. Every grumpy, protective, secretly sweet

part of you."

28

VAEL

"Da-da-da-da!" Kaelin's voice rings through the house as I step through the door, her tiny fists pounding excitedly.

My chest swells with a feeling I'm still getting used to—pride, love, and something fiercely protective that makes my horns tingle. Three months since Trinity and I confessed our love, and I'm still blindsided by these moments.

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"There's my little warrior," I call, setting down my travel bag. Kaelin's red-amber eyes light up, flecks of green shimmering as she squeals louder.

Trinity looks up from where she's feeding Liora, her hair pulled back in a messy knot, dark circles under her eyes. She's never looked more beautiful.

"Look who decided to grace us with his presence," she teases, but the relief in her eyes is unmistakable. Three days on Galmoleth felt like an eternity away from them.

I cross the kitchen in three strides, bending to press my lips to hers. She tastes like sweetberries and home.

"Miss me?" I murmur against her mouth.

"Not even a little," she lies, her fingers curling into my shirt. "The peace and quiet was divine."

Liora chooses that moment to smack at the bottle in Trinity's hand, splashing milk on her cheek. I laugh, wiping it away with my thumb.

"Peace and quiet, huh?"

"You're back early!" Jackie bustles in from the pantry, a basket of fresh quillnash balanced on her hip. "Good thing too—your mate's been driving me crazy asking when you'd return."

"I have not!" Trinity protests, but the flush creeping up her neck tells another story.

Jackie rolls her eyes, setting down the basket. "Every five minutes—'Do you think he's on his way? Should we have heard something by now?'" Her imitation of Trinity's voice is eerily accurate.

"Traitor," Trinity mutters.

I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her against my side. "I'm touched by your concern," I tease, enjoying the way she pretends to scowl even as she leans into me.

"Donna's out back harvesting dreamroot for tea," Jackie says, already turning her attention to slicing the quillnash. "She swears it'll help the twins sleep through the night."

"Nothing will help these two sleep through the night," Trinity sighs, but there's no real complaint in her voice.

I lean down to press a kiss to Liora's dark hair. She blinks up at me with those gold eyes, her little mouth forming an 'O' of surprise before she offers me a gummy smile. Something in my chest cracks open every time she looks at me like that—like I'm her entire world.

"How'd it go?" Trinity asks quietly as I move to extract Kaelin from where she's lying. The more vocal twin immediately grabs for my horns, her favorite handhold.

"Careful, little demon," I warn, wincing as she yanks. "You're stronger than you know."

Trinity waits, her green eyes searching my face. She's asking about more than my journey—she wants to know about the women, the ones like her who were taken from Protheke.

I settle Kaelin against my chest, where she immediately begins exploring the fasteners of my leather jerkin. "It's done. All of them—every last woman in those dungeons—has been relocated."

Trinity's eyes widen, her fingers stalling on the cloth she'd been using to wipe Liora's face. "All of them? Already?"

I nod, unable to hide my satisfaction. "Asmodeus may be a royal pain in my ass, but he moves quickly when motivated. Half have chosen to stay on Galmoeth with decent living quarters and paid positions. The rest have been brought to Aerasak to start fresh."

The back door swings open, bringing with it a waft of sweet-smelling herbs and Donna's cheerful voice. "Look who I found skulking around your back garden!"

My mother steps through the door behind Jackie's wife, looking distinctly uncomfortable with her arms full of colorful wildflowers. Donna, petite and bright-eyed with her half-nymph heritage giving her skin a faint green undertone, beams like she's accomplished something miraculous.

"Your mother was admiring my herb garden," she announces, completely unfazed by the fearsome demoness's scowl. "I thought she might like to see the twins while she's here."

"Mother," I say, surprised. She rarely visits unannounced. "What brings you by?"

Morris's gaze fixes on the twins, something softening in her usually severe expression. "Can't a grandmother visit without an interrogation?"

"A normal grandmother, perhaps," Trinity says with a raised eyebrow. "You, however, usually have an agenda."

Instead of bristling at my mate's directness, my mother actually smirks. "I've decided I like you, human," she says, then thrusts the flowers toward Trinity. "These are for the girls' room. The silver ones ward off night terrors."

Trinity accepts them with a bemused expression. "Thank you."

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Kaelin, spotting her grandmother, lets out a shriek of delight and lunges toward her. I barely catch the squirming bundle before she topples from my arms.

"Maybe she recognizes a fellow troublemaker," Jackie mutters, earning a sharp look from my mother that doesn't quite hide her amusement.

"Give her here," Murriss commands, setting down her elaborate cloak and holding out her arms. "I want to see if she's grown into her horns yet."

I transfer my daughter carefully, watching as my formidable mother transforms into someone almost gentle, cooing at Kaelin in a voice I've never heard her use.

"No bumps yet," Trinity replies, moving to stand beside me as we watch the interaction. "But she's got your temper." She slips her hand into mine, squeezing lightly. "Thank you," she whispers, "for what you did for those women."

I bring our joined hands to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "I promised you, didn't I?"

And I don't have to say it. I'd do anything for Trinity and she knows it.

My mother stays for dinner, surprising all of us by offering to feed Liora while Trinity and I catch our breath. Jackie prepares a feast of roasted tuskram with herbs from Donna's garden, the rich aroma filling our home as night falls. By the time my mother departs—with a promise to return in three days' time for what she calls "proper grandmother duties"—both twins are drowsy, their tiny eyelids drooping.

"I'll put them down," Trinity offers, gathering Liora from my arms. "You just got back. Relax for a minute."

I watch her retreat down the hallway, Kaelin already asleep against her shoulder, Liora blinking sleepily over it. The sight of them together still knocks the wind from my lungs sometimes.

I'm pouring myself a glass of amerinth when a sharp rap sounds at the front door. The sound is too purposeful to be Jackie or Donna returning from their cottage on the property.

"What now?" I mutter, setting down the glass and stalking to the entrance.

The courier standing on my doorstep is reed-thin with ashen gray skin several shades lighter than mine—a half-demon, likely. His horns are small, curved tight against his skull, and he shifts nervously from foot to foot when I fill the doorway.

"Vaelrix Rennick?" His voice cracks slightly. My reputation precedes me, clearly.

"Who's asking?" I lean against the doorframe, intentionally blocking his view into my home. Years of being hunted and hunting others have left me with habits I can't break—protecting what's mine tops the list.

He fumbles with a leather satchel, producing a sealed document. "I have a commission for you from Lord Kaz'Turoth of New Solas."

I recognize the seal immediately—one of the wealthiest merchants in the xaphan territories, known for paying extremely well. In my previous life, I'd have snatched the scroll without hesitation.

"What's the bounty?" I ask, not reaching for it.

The courier looks relieved to stick to familiar territory. "A smuggler who's stolen several artifacts from Lord Kaz'Turoth's private collection. He's believed to be hiding in Vesnios among the gorgons." He clears his throat. "The payment is fifteen novas upon delivery, dead or alive."

My eyebrows rise despite myself. Fifteen novas is enough to live comfortably for several years. Before Trinity, before the twins, I'd have been packed and halfway to Vesnios by morning.

The sound of soft humming drifts down the hallway—Trinity singing the lullaby she reserves for the girls. The one she claims she made up on the spot but I know she practiced for weeks when she thought I wasn't listening.

"I appreciate the offer," I say, straightening to my full height, "but I'm not available for hire right now."

The courier blinks, clearly thrown. "But... Lord Kaz'Turoth specifically requested you. Your tracking skills are unparalleled across?"

"I'm aware of my reputation," I cut him off, not unkindly. "But my priorities have shifted. I have young children and a mate who need me here."

"The lord is prepared to offer twenty novas," he tries, desperation creeping into his voice.

I shake my head. "There's no sum that would take me across the continent right now. But—" I hold up a hand as his face falls, "—I can recommend someone nearly as good."

Relief flashes across his features. "Who?"

"Domno Vrash'Sarrin," I say, picturing my old hunting partner's scarred face. "He's ruthless, efficient, and discreet. Tell him I sent you, and he'll give you fair terms."

"Where can I find this Domno?"

"The Bleeding Heart tavern in Sarziroch. He's there most evenings, corner table with his back to the wall. Mention my name and show him the novas up front."

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The courier nods eagerly, tucking the scroll away. "Thank you, sir. I'll tell Lord Kaz'Turoth of your recommendation."

"One more thing," I add as he turns to leave. "Tell Domno this makes us even for Shozuh."

The courier looks confused but nods. "I'll relay the message."

I watch him hurry down the path until he disappears into the forest before closing the door and securing the locks—another old habit.

"Who was that?"

Trinity stands in the hallway, her hair now loose around her shoulders, wearing one of my old shirts that hangs to her knees. The sight of her in my clothes still sparks something primal in my chest.

"Job offer," I say, crossing to her in three strides.

Her expression shifts, something wary entering her eyes. "Oh? Where to this time?"

I slide my hands around her waist, pulling her against me. "Nowhere. I turned it down."

"You... what?" She tilts her head back to study my face. "Was it not enough money?"

"It was fifteen novas," I murmur, bending to brush my lips along the column of her

throat. She smells like sweetberries and our daughters, a combination that makes my chest ache.

She stiffens in my arms. "Fifteen novas? And you said no?"

I lift my head to meet her gaze. "I'm exactly where I want to be," I say simply. "Here. With you. With our daughters."

Trinity's eyes search mine, like she's looking for the lie, the hidden agenda. Old habits die hard for her, too.

"I sent them to Domno," I add, running my thumb along her lower lip. "He owes me a favor anyway."

A slow smile spreads across her face, transforming her in that way that still makes my breath catch. "You're staying."

"I'm staying," I confirm, capturing her mouth with mine. She melts against me, her arms twining around my neck, fingers threading into my hair. When we break apart, she's breathless, her cheeks flushed.

"The twins are asleep," she whispers against my lips. "For now."

I growl low in my throat, lifting her easily. Her legs wrap around my waist as I carry her toward our bedroom. "Then we should make the most of it."

And I do. I plan to make the most of every moment with my little family, the one I never expected to have.

The one I will never let go of now.